

# **Queer Reconstructions of Spirituality**

**Lived Spirituality and its Implications for Spiritual Care**

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# Queer Reconstructions of Spirituality

Lived Spirituality and its Implications for Spiritual Care

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The research presented in this thesis dives deeper into the lives of queer people and how they relate to practices and experiences of so-called *lived spirituality*. It thereby focuses on the case study of attendees and former attendees of the radical intersectional feminist Groningen Feminist Network (GFN), which is based in the city of Groningen in the north of the Netherlands.

In my experience, queer people often feel disconnected from religions and are very critical towards historical and ongoing actions of the roman catholic church, for instance. However, this critical stance seems to be aimed towards institutional forms of patriarchal religions, that rely heavily on moralism and an imbalance of power relations. As I have been active with the GFN for some years and have personal connections to many of the respondents, I also came across the fact that they were more interested in spiritualities than I had expected of them beforehand. This presumption was based on the negative experiences I knew many queer people have had with religions, but also spiritualities. For whenever I started talking to the queer attendees of the GFN about my studies of protestant theology, they were often interested to share their own journeys with religion and spirituality, and questions and discussions would soon arise. These included individual spiritual practices and discussions about the institution of the church. It came to my attention that everyday spiritual and/or religious practices are being used by queer people in multiple forms and to various extents. While some performed solitary spiritual rituals surrounding witchcraft and herbalism, others were engaged with practices usually located within religious communities, showing that spiritual practices were actively being performed by the respondents.

Furthermore, the research is performed from the vantage point of spiritual care, that is especially concerned with the everyday lives of all people across the globe in their distinct contexts and surrounding theoretical frameworks, and seeks to aid them in their spiritual journeys. As none of the participants were exploring their spirituality in close group settings, but more commonly in solitude, I distinguished the need for guidance in relation to navigating between religions or spiritualities and the own personal identity as a queer person. This poses the question of the significance the self-proclaimed queer intersectional feminists themselves ascribe to those rituals and practices, and in which surrounding theoretical frameworks the latter are embedded.

In the following, the methodological and theoretical framework of the research are explored. After explaining the method used to extract the individual experiences and reflections

connected to practices of lived spirituality, I subsequently analyse the history and structure of the GFN and give a short overview of the participants of the research. The thesis then focuses on the underlying theoretical frameworks. These include the concept of *queerness*, *intersectional feminism*, and *lived spirituality*, also known as lived religion. I then turn to the analysis of the conducted qualitative interviews and the data that they yielded in regard to the research questions. Finally, the findings are interpreted in relation to existing theory on the intersection of queerness and spirituality/religion, and the implications of these findings for the practice of spiritual care.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In the following chapters, the methodological framework of the research is laid down. This includes the theological background and aim of the thesis. As the research question is especially theory-laden, the key concepts of *queerness*, *intersectional feminism* and *lived spirituality* are then explored separately. Finally, a deeper analysis of the *Groningen Feminist Network* and the participants of this research is given, before I turn to the observations and interpretations of the research itself.

The research question to be answered by this research, that will guide us through the thesis boils down to the following:

*In what ways do queer attendees and former attendees of the Groningen Feminist Network relate to a lived spirituality?*

I thereby focus on the intersection of their queer and spiritual identity and how they themselves make use of the theory of intersectional feminism. Therefore, during the research the following sub-questions are taken into account:

*How have the interviewees encountered religion and spirituality in their lives?*

*How do they understand religion and spirituality?*

*What kind of practices do the respondents perform?*

*In which ways does queerness have an impact on their spiritual practices?*

*How does the relation to intersectional feminism influence religious or spiritual practices?*

*Which role does community play in the lives of the participants?*

*What implications do these practices have for the provision of spiritual care?*

### 2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research presented in this thesis is both practical theological and empirical. As the research is based in practical theology, it should be made clear what this encompasses. Swinton and

Mowat define Practical Theology as critical theoretical enquiry and its practical implementation<sup>1</sup>, which takes human experience as its starting point. They also understand faith as a “performative and embodied act”<sup>2</sup>. The outcome of the qualitative research project can inform religious practices such as spiritual care, and lead to a reflection and adjustment of existing theory and praxis. This also includes the understanding of the queer persons relation to individual spiritual practices. Fittingly, the author Emmanuel Lartey describes the aims of pastoral theology as the deeper understanding of the interrelation between the individual and the divine, and the development of individualized forms of care in accordance with said interrelation.<sup>3</sup> This is especially relevant as the practice of spiritual care is a subdiscipline of pastoral theology. Pastoral theology, including chaplaincy studies, and the counselling practice of spiritual care, which are also concerned with the experiences of the individual, originally developed within the domain of practical theology. The author Gordon Lynch explains: “All forms of therapeutic practice, whether psychiatry, social work, counselling or pastoral care, seek to alleviate human suffering and deprivation and seek to promote human well-being.”<sup>4</sup> Jill Snodgrass also includes: “symptom alleviation, increased coping, positive behavioural changes, and improved relationships with self and others”<sup>5</sup> and subsumes “spiritual growth, broadly conceived, is the goal of all pastoral counseling.”<sup>6</sup> As the disciplines of pastoral counselling and social work are both also concerned with the personal experiences and life stories of the individual, these fields show significant overlap with spiritual care. Therefore, this thesis draws upon literature from both of these perspectives in addition to theory on spiritual care on how to accompany and support queer people on their spiritual journeys. Empirical research focuses on the individual experiences of the research subjects, and accesses them not through abstract theory, but by questioning and watching them, as they are performed or reflected upon. These experiences and consequent practices are then complexified and critically reflected on from a theological perspective. Related to the four voices of theology described by Clare Watkins this empirical research becomes theological by focusing on *operant* and *espoused* theology. *Operant* theology focuses on the way theology is practiced and

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<sup>1</sup> Swinton, J., and Mowat, H. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. Second ed., SCM Press, 2016, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Swinton/Mowat. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Lartey, E. *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World*. Pilgrim Press, 2006, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Lynch, G. *Pastoral Care & Counselling*. SAGE Publications, 2002, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Snodgrass, J. “Pastoral Counseling: A Discipline Unity Among Diversity”, in: Maynard, E. and Snodgrass, J. (eds) *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*. Springer Publishing Company, 2015, pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Snodgrass, J. and Noronha, K. “Responding to Explicit and Implicit Spiritual Content in Pastoral Counseling”, in: Maynard, E. and Snodgrass, J. (eds) *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*. Springer Publishing Company, 2015, p. 140.

*espoused* theology is found in the theoretical framework surrounding those practices.<sup>7</sup> In the specific case of this thesis, the (operant) practices and their (espoused) explanation are of special interest to the research. These are difficult to entangle, but are only accessible through the reflections on the practices by the participants of the research, as it is not in the scope of this thesis to accompany them through their everyday lives over a longer period of time, until a practice or ritual occurs.

## 2.2 METHODS

Regarding the method chosen to extract the data from the participants, I chose to use qualitative interviews. This allowed for a deeper insight not only into the practices performed, but also made more accessible the reasonings behind performing such practices. As it is impossible to perceive feelings connected to the practices of lived spirituality from the outside, the reflections upon the practices performed allow a better understanding of the reasonings and constructions of the individual. Although the participants' reflections are strongly opinionated and reflected upon from their own standpoint, this method allows for a deeper understanding of the rich and personal experiences of the subject. It also enables the researcher to delve deeper into various aspects of everyday life and focus on those that are of importance within the given context. In line with the research question, it was to be examined not only which practices were performed, but how the respondents related to these practices and how they were influenced by their queerness and the theory of intersectional feminism. As such, personal accounts of experiences and feelings are crucial to constitute the data that is to be collected, which also makes qualitative research necessary, as opposed to quantitative research, as it allows for a more flexible structure, that can relate to the responses given. These feelings and experiences, practices and opinions form the entity that is to be examined. What constitutes data during the interviews is not only the practices and/or rituals that form a lived spiritual activity by the individuals, but also how they theorize about it and reflect on those actions. This research is also performed inductively as opposed to deductively. A deductive method would have entailed applying a preconceived theory to the experiences of the individuals and only then comparing the data extracted to relevant theory. I however started with the experiences of the individuals and extracting a theory from those insights. This also makes this research somewhat unique to the context of my respondents, as it constitutes a case study of a specific group of queer people, who are strongly influenced by the theory of intersectional feminism. The relevance of the

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<sup>7</sup> Watkins, C. *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020, pp. 39-51.

research therefore becomes clearer during the research itself.

Consequently, to gain access to the experiences of lived spirituality by queer attendees and former attendees of the GFN, semi-structured interviews were applied as part of the qualitative research project. The interviews therefore included a set of prearranged structured questions and an elicitation technique, during which more in-depth questions were asked as to probe deeper into the practices and reflections of the participants. After asking the respondents to introduce and describe themselves, including their gender and sexuality and their experience with feminism and the GFN, an elicitation technique was deployed. This method uses words surrounding the discourse of spiritual to elicit associations and reflections on spiritual practices, similar to Nancy Ammermann's elicitation technique using pictures to draw out those responses.<sup>8</sup> Through the elicitation process I gained access to the practices of lived spirituality that may have otherwise been thought to be mundane and therefore irrelevant. I therefore prepared a list of various terms connected to spirituality and religion and then asked the interviewees to share with me their associations and reflections on those words. At the same time, by probing deeper into the utterances of the participants, I conducted in-depth interviews to gather more data and gain a deeper understanding of the relation of queerness and spirituality, specifically related to the temporary location of the discourse surrounding intersectional feminism. The interviews were conducted via an internet communications platform due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; this however allowed the questions to be on screen during the interviews, making it easier for the respondents to structure their answers. Also, instead of using individual cards for each of the words used during the elicitation process, all of them were arranged on screen in such a way, that the respondents could pick and choose those that they wanted to relate to.

The data gathered through the interviews was then analysed *interpretatively*, by “*reading through or beyond the data*”<sup>9</sup>, including the interpretation of implicit contents and connections to larger discourses. First, I applied inductive coding, collecting common themes found across all interviews to establish categories. Then I used cross-sectional and categorical indexing, applying the distilled themes back the interviews<sup>10</sup>. This meant coding the utterances of the interviewees, collecting and concentrating those themes found to establish a code tree with which I devised several theories. I thereby was not only able to use the data inductively, starting

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<sup>8</sup> Ammermann, N., *Sacred Stories. Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Mason, J. *Qualitative Researching*. Third ed., SAGE, 2018, p. 149.

<sup>10</sup> Mason, J. *Qualitative Researching*, pp. 150-161.



from the utterances of the participants, but could also double check if the distilled categories could be reapplied to the interviews.

As for the topic of sampling the respondents, I selected the participants in such a way to include different genders, sexualities, and religious backgrounds. I was however also influenced by my own relations with the respondents, as I knew that they were in some way connecting with spiritual or religious practices. While the *Groningen Feminist Network* itself is set in a secular context, the respondents are from a variety of religious contexts, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, all are very much influenced by Western European culture and history. For context, I shall give a brief overview of the GFN, followed by a short description of the respondents, their activeness within the GFN, and their respective religious backgrounds.

### **2.3 THE GRONINGEN FEMINIST NETWORK**

As the location of my research I have chosen to concentrate on the Groningen Feminist Network, due to its diversity in religious experiences, and expressions, but also due to its manageability as a common denominator between the interviewed subjects. The GFN was started by a few friends in 2016, who were mostly international students at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. They wanted to meet up with friends and talk about current political and social issues from a feminist perspective once a week in a queer-friendly space. From the beginning, the feminist perspective was claimed to be part of Intersectional Feminism and the Network continues to orient itself within that framework.

Since then, the weekly meeting is the activity of the Network that has been the most regularly active. With the occasional exceptions of holidays this weekly meeting has run through the last odd five years. Just as attendees have fluctuated and changed over time, the organising committee has also gone through various changes. Some attendees have been coming to meetings for up to four or five years, but for the most part attendance has been pretty fluid, with the most active attendees often joining actively for a few years, before new people join and take on leadership roles, or just regularly or irregularly attend meetings organised by the GFN. Within the two years after its founding, the Network had grown substantially and attendance at events has stayed relatively stable since. The GFN has become very prominent as an activist group in Groningen, co-organising protests, such as the first Queer Pride Groningen in 2019 and a similar event in 2021. In 2019 it also brought about its own umbrella organization *Stichting Inclusive Action North* (SIAN) with a small number of other groups active in and around the city, namely *Queer Pride Groningen* (QPG), the *Black Ladies of Groningen* (BLOG), and *asterisk*, a group of trans people and allies working towards

inclusivity, visibility and autonomy.<sup>11</sup> However, member lines are fluid and many are active in more than one of these organisations. While the group aims to be as inclusive as possible, it does tend to cater for young international students, and those from an academic background. For that reason, the research focuses on queer people under 30, as they constitute the overwhelming majority of attendees and former attendees of the GFN weekly and separate club meetings, and demonstrations. As due to the current global COVID-19 pandemic the meetings of the network are taking place online at the time, and consequently participation numbers have stagnated drastically, I have decided to focus not only on current regular attendees, but also on those who have participated periodically in the past. Due to the nature of being a group that was founded only a few years ago, this field of analytics is not too wide or too narrow, and is manageable regarding resources and time.

I myself got involved with the GFN in late 2018, when I came to Groningen through the ERASMUS exchange program for a semester to study at the PThU. Since then, I have stayed in touch with many of the attendees there and not only found new friends, but also a framework to explore my own gender identity and sexuality. It is this insider position that has allowed me to be able to explore more deeply the connections between the practices that can be described as lived spirituality and how they connect to a larger framework of identity intertwined with the gender identities and sexualities of the individuals lives.

### ***2.3.1 The Participants***

As I use Roman Numerals to refer to the respondents throughout this thesis, I shall give a brief overview of the interviewees that are behind those numbers.

Interviewee I is Dutch and from Groningen itself. Although at the time of the interview, they used they/them and he/him pronouns, by the end of the research they were using she/her and they/them pronouns. I therefore used they/them pronouns throughout the thesis. The participant joined the GFN a couple of years ago and their background isn't religious, but some of their family members have been interested in alternative spiritual practices.

Respondent II is originally from Poland, but has been living in Groningen for several years. They use they/them pronouns and while their parents are Roman Catholic, they themselves have converted to Judaism. Due to indifferences with the way the group was influenced by other activist groups, they stopped being active with the GFN a couple of years ago.

Participant III is also Polish and came to Groningen to study. He uses he/him pronouns and joined the GFN at an early stage near the beginning of its foundation. He has however been

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<sup>11</sup> [www.siangroningen.org](http://www.siangroningen.org), last accessed on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

less regularly active within the GFN for some years.

Interviewee IV is from Germany and also joined the GFN during its beginnings after coming to Groningen to study there. She uses she/her pronouns and moved back to Germany two years ago after finishing her studies. Although she went to a Catholic girl's school for some time, her family is both part Protestant and part Roman Catholic.

Respondent V is Dutch and also left Groningen around two years ago, and is now working in Germany. He uses he/him pronouns and was also a part of a Christian student organization while studying in Groningen.

Participants VI and VII are both also German and came to Groningen to study there. They both joined the GFN around 3-4 years ago and as they both still live in Groningen, are still infrequently active with the group. However, as is further explored in the chapter on the GFN, the COVID-19 pandemic has lessened their involvement. However, while participant VI is from a Christian background, interviewee VII comes from a Muslim context. All but respondent I are or have been (international) students in Groningen, some only for a short period of time, some are still living in Groningen due to their relationships or work commitments.<sup>12</sup>

I have decided against using pseudonyms for the participants, as names have different meanings for queer people than for cis people. Some of them have gone through a long process of finding a name that encompasses all parts of the identity. I therefore felt it untactful to ascribe them another name, even for the short usage in this thesis, as they may not feel comfortable with it.

## **2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

After explaining the methodological framework of the research and giving a short overview over the participants, in the following the theoretical framework surrounding the study is analysed. As the research question itself is already theory-laden, this leads to the necessity of examining the three core concepts of queerness, intersectional feminism and lived spirituality, that will be further explored in the following sub-chapters.

### **2.4.1 Queerness**

In this thesis, I use the term “queer” as an umbrella term<sup>13</sup>, and thereby further assist in the reclamation of the word. For the sake of this thesis the word “queer” therefore describes all

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<sup>12</sup> Disclaimer: While the pronouns listed were accurate at the time of finishing this thesis, they may have changed since.

<sup>13</sup> Hays, J. “Pastoral Counseling and Queer Identities”, in: Maynard, E. and Snodgrass, J. (eds) *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*. Springer Publishing Company, 2015, p. 329.

gender identities, sexualities, and gender expressions, that can be categorised as non-heteronormative. I thereby include lesbians, gays, bi-sexual, and asexual people, as well as gender non-conforming, gender-questioning, trans and nonbinary, intersex people, and others who wish to be subsumed under this label.

The more commonly used initialism LGBTQIA+ has constantly been expanded, as it once consisted only of the three letters LGB. Formerly standing only for Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals, over the years the initialism has expanded to include more genders and sexualities, such as trans and nonbinary, intersex and asexual/aromantic people. There are however many more genders and sexualities, than the few mentioned above, as they are self-descriptive. As such, the initialism is already missing many identification labels. This, does not do justice to many, who feel they do not fall into heteronormative categories, but are not represented by the commonly used initialism. The "Q" which was originally short for questioning, and the "+" (plus) or "\*" (asterisk) aim to include any other genders and sexual identities, not included in the initialism. The use of the plus, asterisk or similar symbol, such as the "sparkle emoji" (🌟) as a product of prominent internet culture, consequently represents the acknowledgement of the word's complicated and hurtful history, as explained by Thorn: "The sparkle emoji is a digital gesture that lets you know I'm probably not playing a serious action like using it as a slur".<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Aburrow in her article "Is it Meaningful to Speak of 'Queer Spirituality'?" rightfully mentions the opposition from some members of the LGBTIQ+ community towards the label<sup>15</sup>, because of its use as a slur in the past. However, the cited works range from an age of 15-25 years and as the discourse surrounding queerness is in constant change, the reclamation of the word has expanded rapidly since then. This has taken place especially with the aid of the internet, where the label is discussed in YouTube videos such as those by Abigail Thorn<sup>16</sup>, Marina Watanabe<sup>17</sup>, or Daniel Howell<sup>18</sup>. Although the word was indeed originally derogatory in nature, it had already started to become a self-identification label in the 1950s<sup>19</sup>, and although dropping in popularity in subsequent decades, there are various reasons to reclaim the word and use it regularly to refer to the indefinite labels of gender identity and sexuality. As Claudio Bardella describes it, "[t]he polysemous ambiguity of the label 'queer' (rather than the fixedness of

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hi6j2UXEZM>, 15:11 mins, last accessed on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Aburrow, "'Queer Spirituality'?", p. 139.

<sup>16</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hi6j2UXEZM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hi6j2UXEZM), 31:54 mins.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrwMja\\_VoM0&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrwMja_VoM0&t=2s), last accessed on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrwMja\\_VoM0&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrwMja_VoM0&t=2s), 37:36 mins, last accessed on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Woods, C. *The State of the Queer Nation: A Critique of Gay and Lesbian Politics in 1990s Britain*. Cassell, 1995, p. 30.

‘gay’) enables the continual deconstruction of identity.”<sup>20</sup> Yvonne Aburrow also emphasizes Robert Goss' interpretation of queerness as resistance of normativity<sup>21</sup>, thereby being "critically non-heterosexual, transgressive of all heteronormativities and [...] gay normativities."<sup>22</sup> As such, "queerness" encompasses a metacategory overarching a multiform of non-normative identities.<sup>23</sup> According to Aburrow, it therefore also resists categorization through its critical stance towards normativity, and, as Thorn adds: “queer has never been a single political trend, or consistent aesthetic. It’s always been about family rather than membership. It’s always had internal contradictions and ambiguities, and it’s that quality of being flexible and full of potential that I think is what makes it radical.”<sup>24</sup> The word by this nature becomes especially practical for use in an intersectional discourse, as is illustrated by Bardella: “By abandoning the “white” political labels “gay” and “lesbian”, “queer” widens the common ground not only between gay-identified men and women but also between the latter and people of colour, transsexuals, bisexuals and transgendered individuals.”<sup>25</sup>

In the context of this research the term “queer” is especially appropriate as all respondents referred to themselves as being queer during the interviews conducted. The word queer was thereby used to describe their sexuality and gender as non-heteronormative.

Based on fundamental works, such as those by Simone de Beauvoir<sup>26</sup>, Garfinkel and Goffman<sup>27</sup>, and Judith Butler<sup>28</sup>, Helma Lutz understands gender as constructed. She bases these understandings on the linguistic turn, that understands words as something to and performativity.<sup>29</sup> She explains: “Gender or gender difference is a principle of order, that expects every member of society to assign themselves to one of two genders.”<sup>30</sup> This is however understood as a “socially constructed (as opposed to a *naturally given*) category.”<sup>31</sup> As the concept of queerness actively challenges the binary and heteronormative ascription of gender,

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<sup>20</sup> Bardella, C. “Queer Spirituality” *Social Compass*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2001, pp. 119.

<sup>21</sup> Goss, R. “Queer Theologies as Transgressive Metaphors: New Paradigms for Hybrid Sexual Theologies.” *Theology & Sexuality*, vol. 1999, no. 10, 1999, pp. 45–46.

<sup>22</sup> Goss, “Queer Theologies”, p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> Aburrow, Y., “Is it Meaningful to Speak of ‘Queer Spirituality’? An Examination of Queer and LGBT Imagery and Themes in Contemporary Paganism and Christianity, in: Hunt, S., *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities*. Ashgate Pub, 2009, pp. 139.

<sup>24</sup> [www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hi6j2UXEZM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hi6j2UXEZM), 31:54 mins.

<sup>25</sup> Bardella, “Queer Spirituality”, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir, S. de. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Gallimard, 1949.

<sup>27</sup> Garfinkel, H. *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Prentice-Hall, 1967.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, J. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge, 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Lutz, H. and Amelina, A. *Gender, Migration, Transnationalisierung: Eine Intersektionelle Einführung*. 1. Auflage., 1. Auflage ed., Transcript, 2017, p. 13-18.

<sup>30</sup> Lutz, *Gender, Migration, Transnationalisierung*, p. 14. (My translation, TS)

<sup>31</sup> Lutz, *Gender, Migration, Transnationalisierung*, p. 14. (My translation, TS)

the participants also follow the principles of gender as a societal construction. The notion of performativity also enables the individual to reconstruct their gender in different ways.<sup>32</sup> This construction of queerness is applied to the own identity individually<sup>33</sup>, but also makes use of the theory of intersectionality. In the following I therefore explain the concept of intersectionality as part of its overarching field of feminism.

#### **2.4.2 Intersectional Feminism**

Since the beginnings of the discipline of feminism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the lens to view society through has been an important theory for the challenging of a patriarchal society. While feminism today is defined as “the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes”<sup>34</sup>, there has been a long historical process of what is meant by feminism. Already now, the Britannica definition of feminism uses the term “sexes”, whereas “genders” seems more appropriate to this thesis. Feminism also includes, I would add, the actions and theories surrounding the motivation to achieve said equality.

It was not until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century however, that feminism became more engaged specifically with queer liberation, especially since the emergence of “intersectional feminism” as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989<sup>35</sup>. Ealasaid Munro describes this concept as “the idea that different axes of oppression intersect, producing complex and often contradictory results”<sup>36</sup> while also focusing on reflections on privilege and elitism.<sup>37</sup> These axes of difference include e.g., gender, sex, religion, class and race. Helma Lutz understands intersectionality as a *heuristic device*, meaning the use of a construct to understand and explain social phenomena.<sup>38</sup> This can take place both on an individual and on a structural level, by analysing the intersections with other social categories.<sup>39</sup>

Many attendees of the GFN also use intersectionality as the basis for its activism, as all other axes of identity also intersect with those that feminism fights for. It is therefore used as the basis of an all-encompassing political ideal, that tries to be inclusive of and show solidarity with all forms of oppression. As such, social equality is not constructed through ethics or

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<sup>32</sup> Pilcher, J. and Whelehan, I. *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. Sage, 2004, p. 58.

<sup>33</sup> Pilcher/Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts*, p. 130.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>, last accessed on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Crenshaw, K. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 2015, pp. 139-167.

<sup>36</sup> Munro, E. “Feminism: A Fourth Wave?” *Political Insight*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Munro, “Feminism”, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Lutz, H. “Intersectionality as Method.” *Digest. Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1-2, 2015, p. 39.

<sup>39</sup> Lutz, “Intersectionality as Method”, p. 40.

dignity like religion, or reason or agency like humanism, but based on identity. As there are identities that are located at the intersection of queerness and being a woman, intersectional feminists also seek the liberation of queer people, thereby questioning gender norms as a whole and thus falling in line with the critical stance aimed towards normativity itself, as explored in the previous chapter. Intersectional feminism therefore constitutes one lens to view and interpret society and how to achieve social justice in an all-encompassing form, by trying to be as inclusive as possible of all intersections of identity that are marginalised or oppressed. The author Nancy Ramsay argues that it is also important for pastoral theology to incorporate intersectionality into its practices and theories, as she states:

“Contemporary pastoral theology requires resources that help us read and resist asymmetries of power and privilege that at once organize individuals’ sense of identity such as sexism, racism, and heterosexism, as well as structural asymmetries insinuated in key cultural institutions that articulate and reproduce norms in ideology, governance, and economics. Attention to asymmetries of power also points to prioritizing methodological resources that help ensure we hear and learn directly from the experience of those oppressed by asymmetries such as colonialism, racism, sexism, and neoliberal capitalism.”<sup>40</sup>

In the case of this research specifically it is vital to understand and apply intersectional theory, as the respondents all make use of intersectional feminism, making its utilization necessary to engage on the same level as them, and comprehend the various intersections of identities that are present - primarily those of gender identities and sexuality with others - when talking to them about spirituality and religion.

Therefore, intersectionality is used on three levels by the participants. Firstly, to understand and construct the own identity with the help of different axes of difference. Secondly, it is used as a heuristic device to analyse structural oppression. And thirdly, it is used to construct a unified identity of those being oppressed, to extend solidarity and fight for universal justice together.

### **2.4.3 *Lived Spirituality - or Lived Religion?***

I shall now explain the usage of the term lived spirituality, or lived religion. Ganzevoort and Roeland describe *lived religion* as an activity related to "sacredness, transcendence and

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<sup>40</sup> Ramsay, N. “Analyzing and Engaging Asymmetries of Power. Intersectionality as a Resource for Practices of Care”, in: Ramsay, N. (ed.), *Pastoral Theology and Care. Critical Trajectories in Theory and Practice*, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, p. 149-174.

existentiality"<sup>41</sup>, thereby initially demarcating it as a very large subject of interest. As such, the definition of something being conceived as lived religion, is not bound by dogmatic institutionalised interpretations of pious life, but relate to the performative aspect of the practices.<sup>42</sup> Peter Hill et al. emphasize the concept as having to include a spiritual aspect to be able to refer to it as what Ganzevoort and Roeland call *lived-religion*:

“[B]ehaviors or lifestyles are not spiritual simply because they serve an integrative function in life. To say ‘I find my spirituality in gardening’ or ‘Music is my spirituality’ might indeed suggest that a person finds great satisfaction and subjective well-being through gardening or playing music (and thus, the person may take gardening and music seriously, perhaps even to the point of building his or her life around those activities), but unless such lifestyles are responses to a perception of the Sacred (e.g., the person gardens because caring for nature is a way of experiencing the creative forces of the universe, the person plays and listens to music because its beauty and the complex mathematical structures underlying music cause the person to contemplate the beauty and order of God or the entire universe), then it is inappropriate to refer to gardening or music as ‘spiritual.’”<sup>43</sup>

For the sake of the argument, we shall therefore adopt the definition of lived religion as practices connecting to what is perceived as sacred by the individual.<sup>44</sup> This again however leaves the question as to what the term “sacred” entails. The sacred in the following is understood as something that is larger than the self, including such concepts as transcendence and existentiality. It thereby describes something intangible, that can be experienced, but not fully grasped by the individual human being.

This is in line with what Darris Means et al. include in their definition of spirituality as the aspect of relation to a higher power or spirit, additionally to internal congruence and connectedness with other people.<sup>45</sup> Deal and Magyar-Russell also bring up the notion that spirituality can take place in secular contexts, as opposed to religion, and regardless of the religious background.<sup>46</sup>

As Hill et al. denote, a contrast is commonly perceived between “spirituality as having positive connotations through its association with personal experiences of the transcendent [...] and

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<sup>41</sup> Ganzevoort R., and Roeland J., “Lived Religion: The Praxis of Practical Theology”, *International Journal of Practical Theology*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2014), pp. 95.

<sup>42</sup> Ganzevoort/Roeland, “Lived Religion”, p. 97.

<sup>43</sup> Hill, P., “Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure”, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30:1, p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ganzevoort/Roeland, “Lived Religion”, p. 100.

<sup>45</sup> Means, D., et al. “‘Keep Your Spirit Aligned’: A Case Study on Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Students Defining and Practicing Spirituality.” *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol. 59 No. 5, September-October 2018, p. 620.

<sup>46</sup> Deal/Magyar-Russell, “Religious and Spiritual Assessment”, p.122.



[...] religion with its demands of tradition in a much more negative light as a hindrance to spiritual experience”<sup>47</sup>, thereby drawing upon the research by Spilka and McIntosh<sup>48</sup>, and Turner et al.<sup>49</sup>. As “religion” is more often than not negatively connotated in the Western queer community, while “spirituality” is a concept that can be shaped and formed individually, making personal practices of lived religion and the surrounding discourse more easily accessible. While authors such as McGuire see a clear enough distinction between religion and *lived* religion<sup>50</sup>, as I am interviewing my participants about their practices, I think it more fruitful to use the term “spirituality” in relation to their individual practices, rather than “religion”. Therefore, while adhering to the concept of *lived religion*, I choose to use the term *lived spirituality*, rather than *lived religion*, to have easier access to individual spiritual practices.

### 3 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

After explaining the methodology and theoretical framework, we can now turn to the analysis of the data that three interviews yielded.

The first observation during the interviews, was that the respondents identified themselves as queer and as intersectional feminists, and held, or had held, the GFN in high regards. As the participants fulfilled these criteria for the research, we can now take a look at their practices of lived spirituality and how they related to them. It soon became clear that the respondents’ relation to spiritual practices come from a distinct view on spiritual and religious practices that have deep running implications informed by other parts of their identities and personal histories. As such, I distinguished six themes that are simultaneously distinct and also deeply entangled with each other: **1.** The queer gender identities and sexualities, that have been found through a long searching process, form a major part of the individual’s selfhood and relate strongly to other parts of their lives, and have led to a better understanding of and yearning for authenticity and closeness to self. **2.** All respondents have had distinct experiences with religion and spirituality, which has influenced their relation to their own spirituality and religiousness. They hereby emphasize the very personal and individual aspect of this process. **3.** While communities, such as the GFN, other activist communities, and internet communities are central to the formation and understanding of their own identity and political beliefs, the GFN

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<sup>47</sup> Hill, “Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality”, p. 58.

<sup>48</sup> Spilka, B. & McIntosh, D., Religion and Spirituality: The Known and the Unknown. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> Turner, R. et al., Religious or Spiritual Problem: A Culturally Sensitive Category in the DSM-IV, *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, no. 183, 1995, pp. 435-444.

<sup>50</sup> McGuire, M. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 12-13.

itself is not connected to the discourse on spirituality or religion, so that there is no space or framework for many of the respondents to talk about and explore their spirituality and religion in their everyday lives, other than as an individual. 4. The interviewees' queer identity has strongly informed their ability to reflect upon their own self, others, and the political and social connections and interactions between them. As such, the spiritualities and/or religions the respondents connect with, are reflected upon and reinterpreted to fit with their gender identity and sexuality, and their political beliefs. 5. The respondents had different interpretations of religion and spirituality, some of them distinguishing between the two, while others did not. However, they connected with the word "sacred", showing that the concept of sacredness can serve as a valuable access point to the discussion of spirituality or religion with queer people. 6. The performed practices of lived spirituality are informed by deeper reflections on the relation between the own queer identity and spirituality and religion. Rituals of lived-religion are also consciously used as tools to structure time and concentrate on the inner workings of the person, focusing on thoughts and needs, that otherwise may not be as easily accessible. Additionally, the participants incorporated science as a major factor for the embrace of spirituality and religion into the discussions and were especially critical of non-reflexive spiritualities.

### 3.1 QUEER JOURNEYS

During the interviews, the interviewees illustrated how their gender identities and sexualities formed a major part of their own identity, informing other parts of their lives. Most of the respondents explained how finding this identity had been, or partially still is, a long searching process and how authenticity and closeness to self was very important to them.

The queer labels the interviewees ascribed to themselves were various and not clearly distinct, as some for example, respondent II identified as "bisexual, or more like panromantic [...], kind of asexual, but also not, but like demisexual, and I tend to be polyamorous, I'm trans, non-binary, agender". However, the respondents not only referred to themselves using the distinct categories, but also using the overarching term "queer". Interviewee V explained the choice of using "queer" as an umbrella term along with or instead of the separate labels:

"I like 'queer' as a term, because it's both meaningful and very broad, like you have other ways to say things that are similar to queer, like LGBT for example, but the thing is that like in LGBT the letters all stand for particular things, you have lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, but there are people who don't fit with that, who are nevertheless queer [...]. Like there are even some people who can't really put a finger on it [...] they can still be queer, and I think there's a lot of freedom in that".

And as interviewee III pointed out, these words are only constructions, and can be used in various ways:

“Words that we use to describe our identities, is that it’s all they are, they are just words that we use to make sense of individual and collective experiences. And I think that like ‘queer’ encompasses the most of those experiences, [...] I could identify with like transmasculine, trans man, transgender, non-binary, genderfluid, like demi-boy, like all of those could technically fit, or I could just say ‘I’m queer’.”

This makes clear why the respondents prefer to use the term “queer”, as the individual labels are manifold, fluid and intersecting, and the word “queer” can be used as an umbrella-term, that encompasses all of these.

Some of the respondents were also more specific on what their queer identity had an impact on, as respondent I explained: “my queerness is a very personal aspect of my life, but also a very political aspect of my life. I subscribe to sort of a philosophy of queerness that sort of entails a very political active participation, so I am an activist, I am active in feminism circles, intersectional specifically, intersectional feminism.” On the topic of feminism, interviewee VI added: “for me feminism is just my access point, because it speaks to my experience as a queer person, to think about injustice or just start thinking about injustice in terms of gender and sexuality.” As the participants were very aware of the theory of intersectionality and understood themselves to belong to the categories of being queer and spiritual/religious, they also actively constructed their identities with the help of intersectional theory. Coming to these understandings of their own identities however, was the outcome of a long searching process, that for some of the interviewees was still ongoing. While some had already more or less figured out their identity, others were still in the process of finding their self. Some of the respondents focused more on the “searching” part of the process, saying for example “I’m searching like for kind of truth, or a kind of idea that really fits with me and I’m kind of yeah, I’m on a journey to figure out what I really want, I guess that’s the process of searching, [...] like learning more about myself and what I need and where I can get it”, as respondent II put it. Respondent VII underlined the longevity of such a process: “As a queer person, that is a really important process, or that is also just a really long process potentially, where there are so many different stages and so many different hurdles where you basically need to learn about the identity that applies to you, then you also need to figure out, how exactly you relate to that and how it fits into your life.”

Another aspect, that could be found across all of the interviews was the importance of finding to the authentic self. This included speaking your own truth, expressing yourself, the freedom

of making own life choices, finding fulfilment, and self-acceptance. Interviewee VI also saw the process of the journey itself as a way to find that ‘closeness to self’: “I went like a long time basically just noticing something was up with my identity, and just thinking about it a lot and trying to figure it out and sort of searching and like and comparing my experiences with other experiences, and so for me like my queerness really brought me in tune with myself. [...] I feel like that makes me very close to myself.” Other respondents focused on authenticity of self, while also including other concepts, such as freedom, community, and intersections with other parts of their identity. As interviewee V stated that “it would be really helpful to have the space, where you can be unapologetically true to who you are and honest and kind of like authentic”. Respondent IV on the other hand focused on the self, rather than community, saying: “Self-acceptance is very important, I think, it’s about self, that I accept myself, then I didn’t need other people to validate me.” Participant I pointedly described it as the following: “this is the only life you have, so you might as well live it in a way that’s authentic to yourself and that does the least harm to others”, while also connecting it to self-expression, as they said “speaking your own truth, being yourself, expressing yourself, so it’s very much connected to self-expression”.

We can therefore see, how the queer people interviewed were all on a journey to find their gender identity and/or sexuality and their authentic self. While some had already come to an end in the search for their own identity, all respondents had experienced this journey at some point in their lives.

### **3.2 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION**

During their journeys to find their gender identity and spirituality, and live them authentically, all respondents had made negative experiences with religion or spirituality, either themselves, or through people in the surrounding vicinity. The responses ranged from criticisms of certain practices and teachings of the church through historical actions to actual trauma. While the experiences spanned across various topics, gender identity and sexuality were recurring subjects. The respondents were however aware that their experiences were personal and individual and could be very different for other people, although many of them traced back to their gender identity and/or sexuality.

Commonly, subjects such as teachings of an afterlife as a form of escaping social responsibilities, or the proclamation of an ultimate truth were scrutinized, such as by interviewees III and I, respectively. Respondent IV exclaimed criticisms towards the practices of church services and dress codes for women at the Roman Catholic school she attended. She then also criticised

double standards being taught in Roman Catholic Church and the misuse of religion and spirituality by conspiracy theorists, cults, or evangelical Christians, as she said: “I know people in my own life, who would say they’re spiritual and they like spread so much misinformation and brought so much misery to their families by giving money to like people who like are like total scam artists.” Interviewee III was very critical about, what they called, the “propaganda” and the “hatred” taught by the Roman Catholic Church and respondent I also added concerns about proselytizing, saying: “often when people bring up that [spiritual] aspect of their religion, whether it’s intentional or not, it feels like, they’re sort of moving into conversion territory, where they’re trying to convince you, like they’re trying to [...] evangelize you, like whether explicitly or implicitly, and whether consciously or unconsciously.”

Another point, that many of the respondents raised, was their experiences with the way religion and spirituality have had and continue to have various issues with queer people. For instance, respondent IV talked about how being bisexual at a Catholic girl school led her to doubt her identity: “when I was 13, [...] I was like in a Catholic girl school, I was like ‘I am such a bad person, why am I attracted to people who are not men?’” Others made experiences within other context of Christianity, such as interviewee V, who spoke about being a member of a Christian student society, “where there were a lot of conservative Christians. It was already a really big deal when somebody came out as a gay, and if people have issues with somebody being out as gay, they will almost always also have issues with somebody being trans, often more issues”. He also talked about the experiences of other people in his vicinity, such as the example of a friend of his: “A friend of mine was a member of [...] an evangelical church [...]. And her sister is a lesbian, and once her sister came out, the whole family was basically like ejected from the church, not officially, it was just very unpleasant for them to be there. [...] There was a social pressure to, for the family to reject her, so they would be accepted by the community.” Respondent VI didn’t only focus on the practices and teachings, but also mentioned the history of the institution of the church, saying: “it wasn’t that I understood that I was queer and all of a sudden all of the people around me were very queerphobic, but just that I noticed more and more the more I grew up basically, the more I was aware of the rules that there are. [...] And then also just this vague sense of Christianity has a really violent history towards a lot of people.” Similarly, interviewee VII spoke about parallel understandings of Islam, as she said: “There has been so much shame, and so much anger. [...] I think religion is [...] often used to justify violence and homophobia and queerphobia. [...] It’s almost made impossible to believe in the religion and at the same time be queer.” Two respondents also spoke about trauma and abuse that was connected to spirituality and religion, such as the instance of a spiritual ritual

that bordered on sexual assault. While it is important to acknowledge the pain and suffering that has been caused by the misuse of spirituality and religion, for reasons of discretion they shall however not be further examined here.

As we have seen, all respondents have made explicit or implicit negative experiences with the framework surrounding religion and spirituality. In relation to the constructive part of their spirituality, they also understood their own experiences as not universally applicable, as others may have other experiences and have different needs. They thereby focused on the personal, as well as the individual aspects. Respondent I underlined the personal aspect very strongly by saying: “you do not get to decide for me, what is and isn’t spiritual, for me personally, right? You do not get to dictate my, the nature of my connection to these actions and these communities for me. [...] That’s a decision that I feel is something that only I can make.” Respondent III also said, talking about their personal spirituality, “for me it is self-led and self-governed spirituality. So, you know, I decide, what the goals are, and what I’m doing instead of having some like outer authority of a priest telling me that”. Others focused more on the theme that experiences and needs are very individual, and how those could be influenced by queerness, as interviewee V uttered: “I don’t think there is anything I believe, that anyone who was not queer at all could not believe, but I do have particular experiences, that other people might not have and those experiences also influence how I experience spirituality and religion.” Respondent II made clear that these experiences were different for every person, and it was possible to live with the intersection of being queer and spiritual.

### **3.3 COMMUNITY**

Many of the responses were connected to the GFN and other communities, showing the important role it played or had played for the respondents. In fact, there were so many detailed responses that I cannot do the personal connection between the respondents and the GFN justice in the scope of this thesis. However, not only the GFN but other communities, such as other activist communities, religious communities, and online communities, also play a vital role in the interviewee’s lives, and for their own personal journeys to find their own identity. During the interviews the respondents brought up two defining factors that are of vital importance to them when it comes to the experience with the GFN. Firstly, acceptance played a large role, as their queerness was not accepted in all spaces, and the embracing acceptance at the GFN was greatly appreciated. Secondly, the GFN was understood as a place of education and learning by the respondents, especially when it came to the intersectional and queer frameworks surrounding the journey of finding to their own identity.

On the aspect of community, interviewee I stated: “the Groningen Feminist Network is the means through which I found basically everyone that is important in my life right now, it’s the means through which I connect with almost all other queer people in my life, how I got to know almost all other queer people in my life”. They then went on to describe why this aspect is so important to them: “In the GFN and also other spaces, but similar environments, I just really feel like I can be myself, I feel like I’m accepted, I’m appreciated.” This was made especially clear when contrasted with the respondents’ personal experiences with communities, where they were not accepted for who they were. As respondent III recounted: “I have had the life of not being accepted in a whole bunch of spaces, I can tell when I’m not being accepted explicitly or implicitly in a community, so to me like my community is a community that accepts me”. How the aspect of acceptance is relevant to the establishment of a personal spirituality and subsequently forms of lived spirituality was explained in detail by interviewee VI:

“As a queer person, if you don’t feel a minimal level of safety, like for me it would be difficult to even have the mind space I think, to consider, yeah to consider like stuff like ‘oh, what is my spiritual identity, or like what is my spiritual need maybe?’ [...] like I’m not the only queer person surrounded by straight people, so my queerness becomes my one defining factor, but where it’s like ‘oh ok, I have a lot of queer people around me and everybody is queer in different ways so I can really specifically think about what does my queerness mean to me, and how does it impact different parts of my life’ and what is, yeah, what is for example then my access to spirituality.”

Therefore, being accepted is on the one hand vital to feel included in a community and on the other hand enables thinking about other aspects in life, apart from the personal journey to find as a queer person.

The other aspect brought up was the educational character of the GFN, as respondent VII explained: “it was a really important educational space for me, [...] so the Feminist Network for me was a really important space to find like, find my own voice and be ok with like with it, and like accept that this is what I believe in”. As such, it was not only a space to learn about new perspectives and lenses to interpret the world and socio-political discourses, such as through intersectional feminism, but also a space to learn more about the self and relation to the other. It thereby was also central to the understanding and formation of the own identity, as was reported by respondent V: “I’m a relatively different person, than when I was a member there, like a lot of things have happened over the past few years, but the different person that I am is also partly because of the Groningen Feminist Network, because I got into contact with a lot of people, who were very different than the people I knew before, and that really helped

shape a lot about who I am today”. Similarly, interviewee VI started understanding themselves better after getting in touch with the GFN: “The first time I really realized, that was when I moved to Groningen and all of a sudden, I was surrounded by a lot of queer people, like queer in like a lot of different ways, and that made me realize a lot of things about myself, that before I did not have so much of a framework for.” The two respondents VI and VII also directly connected community to their spirituality, as both stated that they had not yet found a communal framework to explore their personal spirituality more deeply. Respondent VI talked about how Church services gave them a sense of communal spirituality, but that they hadn’t found anything similar with queerness. Interviewee VII actively missed such a community to explore her spirituality and queerness at the same time: “I thought about somehow starting a kind of community for queer Muslims, because I think there is a unique struggle [...] for Muslims to be queer. I think it would be really helpful to have the space, where you can be unapologetically true to who you are and honest and kind of like authentic, but also have like a cultural space, or space where you can connect to others.” So far, she had not been able to find a queer community in Groningen and relied on the participation in the online community, which however did not fulfil the needs expressed above. She also based the yearning for such a group on cultural factors: “I do often crave that feeling of like connecting to others, also based on culture, because for me also Islam for example is cultural, not necessarily only religious, or spiritual, but also cultural.”

In relation to other communities apart from the GFN, interviewee I brought up the connection to a timeless and worldwide community, as they said: “my queerness connects me to with the queer struggles all over the world, and also over time”. Community therefore is not only understood in a way limited to personal relationships, but also built around similarities in identity. Respondent VII also brought up the fact, that communities do not need to pre-exist, but can also be founded, created and shaped according to the needs of a group of people, as she said “community is also something that you can find, but you can also make, so if you don’t find your space, you can also create one. [...] Yeah, so community is something that I always strive for having but also think about creating for others as well.”

As I have shown, community plays a vital role in the lives of the respondents. However, while the GFN has given them a framework to understand and find themselves and the world around them, there is no space in the community for the exploration of spirituality or religion. When spirituality or religion were talked about between attendees of the GFN, it was outside of the official meeting times and spaces, as respondent V explained, “sometimes the discussion like after the meeting in the bar got even better after that. There was a surprising amount of talk



about spirituality too, because of course a lot of people at the Groningen Feminist Network are queer and a lot of queer people have very bad experiences with religion” and saying that he was always very open and clear about the role religion and spirituality played in his life. Therefore, it is clear, that community itself is central to the exploration of the self and potentially also spirituality for the respondents, and that the GFN currently does not fill that space.

### **3.4 QUEER REFLECTIONS**

During the conversations, many of the respondents spoke of self-reflection as something that they often practice. On the one hand, this was connected to the intersectional lens chosen to analyse the world and its structures. On the other hand, it was connected to being queer, and how queerness and reflection are interdependent, as the latter arises from the former. They also intersectionally reflected upon religions and spiritualities, while critically examining their histories. As such, the respondents did not only show the ability to reflect upon themselves and their surroundings, but also actively applied the reflection process to aid them in finding the right religion or spirituality to fit with their personal identity. They did this, while acknowledging the different meanings and uses spirituality and religion could have for different people.

Respondents VI and VII for example traced their ability to reflect back to their queerness and learning about the theory of intersectionality. Interviewee IV said: “I have to spend a lot of time with introspection due to my gender and sexuality and that also lead to a lot of thoughts about how do I view the world, and how do things make sense to me, and where do I find meaning”. Interviewee VI had a parallel understanding of the process, as they said: “without being queer I’m not sure, if I would have discovered feminism in the same way, and if I would have reflected on myself quite so much.”

Respondent I also spoke about how reflection is implemented in their political activism: “I spend a lot of time thinking about things that intersect with queerness and trying to sort of do my part to build a more inclusive better and nicer world for people, but especially for queer people and other vulnerable marginalised groups of people.” They then added: “reflecting on just like the state of the world, but also on your role in that, like just because you’re trying to make a better world, doesn’t mean you’re automatically absolved of your participation in the harmful aspects of the world that we live in, so you know reflection is also good to acknowledge the parts that you do play in that. And how to best minimize that.”

Respondent VII interpreted the reflection process itself as a form of spirituality, as she said: “To me spirituality are the many little things, so for example that the self-reflection, kind of

constant putting things into consciousness, like things that you unconsciously do, or things that you believe unconsciously, that you bring them to your consciousness and think about it and reflect on it and think, it's almost like a constant conversation with yourself, to me at least."

As we have seen, not only do the respondents reflect upon and reinterpret spiritualities in different ways, but some of them also saw the reflection process itself as a spiritual practice. How important this reflection process is to the interviewees becomes even clearer, when analysing what types of spiritual practices they actively criticized, such as non-reflexive spiritualities. Respondent V for example critiqued the appropriation of spiritual practices without the reflection on their origin, as he said: "I think that's really important, like there's ways to be spiritual, that are very selfish and individual. [...] It's a bit of a stereotype, but you know like the person who like posts on their Instagram about how much yoga they are doing. And I'm like, that's great for you, but [...] if you can develop spiritually, but what is that development worth, if you're doing it on your own and you are not in a community?" He then went on to say "there's nothing wrong with doing yoga. It's just that like, it can't be the only thing that you do, [...] I don't think it's authentic to themselves either" and added "if your spirituality is like, I go on a long holiday to India, and I like visit a monastery and like, I'm a bit of a Western asshole there, like, that I think, that's selfish. That's like quintessential selfish spiritual practice."

We can therefore see, how not only the reflection process is of great importance to the respondents, but also the authenticity to the self and the own identity and heritage. As interviewee VII made clear, to her, spirituality "feels grounding, it feels like I'm being, kind of authentic and to the core."

### **3.5 SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AND THE SACRED**

After we have established the ability to reflect upon the self and the surroundings, we can turn more specifically to how this reflection processed is applied to the search for a connection to religion and spirituality. Interviewee IV spoke about making use of the reflection process to analyse the degree to which a form of spirituality is compatible with her own beliefs as she said: "If I'm interested in one part of spirituality, I always check, what is like the history, is like created by someone homophobic, or donated to like bad causes, or who was like a racist or something like that, [...]. I think it is very important that it aligns with what I think about myself, and about sexuality, gender, and like my political beliefs." Which roles spirituality and religion play in the lives of the participants is explored in this chapter.

When it comes to analysing lived religion, or lived spirituality, we previously defined its meaning as “practices connecting to what is perceived as sacred by the individual”. The concept of the “sacred” can be understood as something that is larger than the self, thereby including such concepts as transcendence and existentiality. During the interviews it became clear that, while some respondents saw a difference between religion and spirituality, others did not, and even went so far as to strongly oppose such distinction. What was evident however, was that one concept can hardly be explained without the other, as both are intertwined and not clearly distinguishable.

Similar to many of the other respondents, interviewee III described *spirituality* as an “attempt to connect with something bigger than yourself”, thereby focusing on the relation and connection between the self and something immaterial and larger than self. Respondent I also interpreted it as “the state or practice of connecting yourself to something intangible or, [...] like a higher power, through ritual or devotion”. The focus for respondent II also lay on the low-threshold accessibility of spirituality: “I find spirituality [...], it’s something, yeah, I guess fluid in a way, something that anyone can experience regardless of their religion, is easily accessible, I don’t think it requires very much reading or thinking about it, it just kind of like enjoying something for what it is.” Respondent VII on the other hand focused more on the individual and personal nature of spirituality, stating: “I see spirituality in the broadest terms I guess, like guiding principles [...], that are internal to a person, that can be also guided through religions or through beliefs, but I would interpret them more core, so more personal and less external”. Similarly, interviewee V understood spirituality as “a way of giving meaning to things in a chaotic world on a more individual level. Although it doesn’t have to be individual, as there are also spiritual practices which are like shared between people”, thereby also taking into account the questions about the individual versus the communal nature of spirituality.

Some of the interviewees however also understood spirituality to be a form of distraction, be that in a positive or negative way. Respondent III for example said: “I think that it can be a comfort, but it can also be a distraction from what is actually going on in your life, and how you effect people around you, how things around you are”. Interviewee VI saw spirituality in a slightly more positive light, also seeing the advantages as a distraction: “it feeds this emotional need, [...] like “oh, I hope that this and this can happen for me”, and then spirituality can give you a bit like this inner calm of being like ‘oh, if it’s meant to happen it will happen, and if not, there was probably also a reason’, so I feel like it can be a sense to cope in that way.” Respondent IV had several demands to a spirituality that she would be comfortable with, saying: “I think sometimes spirituality is just about connecting with yourself, and like using certain things to

connect with yourself and with others and with communities, but I think it's like it shouldn't be very hierarchical and like it shouldn't cost money, or it should be very accessible, because then like I said, it should be also kind of, it should be spirituality, with a little bit of science". How science is related to the reflections on spirituality is explored in chapter 3.6.3.

*Religion* on the other hand was perceived as being more structured, as respondent V said: "religion requires community and with that it also becomes more formalised, like it is something you do together and when you do it together you have some kind of agreements, spoken and unspoken.". Interviewee I similarly focused on the structured element of religion, as they said: "I see religion as the practice, so just like, ok, there's a church and you go there on a certain day, or [...] church or temple or mosque, [...] and you do, you observe certain practices, in certain places at certain times for certain reasons". They thereby also highlighted the institutional character religions can take on, while others were aware of the multiple forms religion could take. Respondent II for example described it as "a set of beliefs, it's, kind of written down somehow and passed on, it can be very structured, it can also be like from like different ethnic groups that exist, and non-hierarchical structures." It could also be defined as "an organization, but there is also religion, that is not organized, but I think religion is kind of something that gives shape to spirituality, specific rituals, specific doctrines, specific gods, I think that's religion", as respondent III put it.

As the last quote clearly shows, even when distinguishing between the two concepts, religion and spirituality can hardly be described without referring to each other. It became clear during the conversations with the respondents that things are however not as clear cut, as it initially seemed, as many questioned the sharp distinction of spirituality from religion. As respondent I uttered, "I sort of see spirituality as a separate thing from religion. Even though they do overlap a lot". Interviewee IV found it hard to differentiate between the two, saying "for me there is not a big difference". Respondent II had previously thought of the two concepts being clearly separable, but now stated, "I used to think that religion is like everything that's organised and has a structure, and that spirituality is just kind of everything else, yeah I don't think that's true, it's much more complex than that, and I think people who are religious have spiritual experiences all the time", and subsequently summarizing: "I used to think that it's very different from religion, but now I don't think I can differentiate them so much. I think they're very much similar." However, respondent VI attempted to untangle religion from spirituality, by focusing again on the organizational structure often associated with religion as opposed to the experience of something bigger than the self:

“Spirituality is just a moment where you just feel very connected or very aware of that being, and [...] religion is then a bit more like how do you organize that, where you maybe do have rules, you have specific rituals, you have just also the name of your religion that ties you to other people that also follow that religion [...] and they basically have this institution that is deciding like what is happening.”

While the individual and personal characteristics of spirituality were juxtaposed in opposition to the often communal and institutionalised understanding of religion, most respondents were aware of the difficulties when trying to untangle the two, expressing the belief that they are connected. The previous interviewee thereby showed, that while distinctions can be made between religion and spirituality, they are inextricably bound together and interdependent.

Spirituality and Religion were actively reflected upon in various different ways by the respondents. While some explained the reinterpretation of some spiritualities and religions, others raised concerns about the adoption of spiritual practices without reflecting on them and being aware of their history and original meanings.

Respondent IV said: “I really like the idea of witchcraft, [...] it’s the same as with the word queer, it has like this reclaiming quality”. The reclaiming and reinterpretation were also something that interviewee III had explored, especially in relation to their interest in Slavic-pagan religion and spirituality:

“We have our own [...] day of love celebrations, which I’m also choosing to queer up, [...] cause it was basically the only day in the year, where, when you were allowed to get married without your parents blessing. And that’s gay as fuck! And all like all you had to do is just at a certain time in the night you had to like jump over a fire holding hands, that was it. And like boom, you’re married. So that’s like extremely queer.”

It therefore becomes clear, that spiritualities are explored in context of the respondents’ queerness and the ability to reflect on and reinterpret them. Interviewee V also shared how he interpreted queerness in relation to his beliefs:

“I do have particular experiences, that other people might not have and those experiences also influence how I experience spirituality and religion, like I wouldn’t, I probably wouldn’t have thought as much about like “huh, it’s a bit weird we always call God ‘he’”, if I was entirely cis for example, personally like I like to think that like, if God made us in their image, that means that God has all genders, including none. And I like to provoke people a bit by using they/them pronouns for God sometimes.”

Respondent VI explored why they thought it was attractive for queer people to explore witchcraft and spirituality: “people exploring witchcraft and [...] herb magic is this kind of attempt to connect to a sort of spirituality that is not connected to a church, that they might

have made negative experiences with, but then find an alternative outlet that will still give you this sense of belonging to something that is bigger than yourself, and I think that is something, that I also recognize.” After being asked in which contexts they felt spiritual, interviewee VI went into great detail to explain how their spirituality was tied to community experiences for them:

“I just feel like a lot of rituals that I have in my life are informed by other parts of my identity, and not by my queerness. [...] What we maybe sort of have in [...] the queer communities that I am a part of, are these kind of small rituals of going to pride together and how you prepare that and that you often meet beforehand, you make, like you draw boards together, you paint boards together, and then you assemble at the train station and then you travel there together and then maybe paint each other’s bodies in the train, I think these kind of things feel closest to like rituals that come, yeah, that sort of bring a community together, [...] they are just very joyful, but I mean that probably is not contradictory to them being sort of serving a ritualistic function.”

At the end of the interviews, I gave the respondents a definition of spirituality and asked them to share with me their reflections on this particular definition: “*The feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviours that arise from a search for the sacred. The term “search” refers to attempts to identify, articulate, maintain, or transform. The term “sacred” refers to a divine being, divine object, Ultimate Reality, or Ultimate Truth as perceived by the individual*”<sup>51</sup>. What became clear, was that the term sacred was especially focused on, including the way it was defined in each instance. On the one hand, respondent IV was critical of the concept of sacredness in the context of holiness or the inflationary use to describe sports for example, saying “I don’t like it because in German it’s also like a saint, and I don’t like that. I don’t like when people say that, like ‘this is sacred and that is sacred’ [...] Some people say that and I don’t get it and it makes no sense to me, even when they say it about really stupid things, like when they say ‘oh no, this is scared to me because I love this thing’, like football or something.” Interviewee II on the other hand pondered the different uses it could entail: “I don’t know about the sacred, but I like the idea of like sacredness in mundane things, like in everyday life, in things that you can find around you but also in people, I don’t know about animals, kind of this feeling that you yourself are sacred and you’re just one part of this, of a bigger group, with your consciousness and existing there [...] So I think there is something very transcendental about that, yeah.”

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<sup>51</sup> Hill, P., “Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality”, p. 66.

However, others were keen on the concept of sacredness, as respondent VII reflected further on the term, saying:

“And I like that this definition also differentiates, like it can be a being, it can be an object, it can be a reality or truth, that you’re seeking, [...] instead of seeing it as an entity, for me it’s more like a state of being, if that makes sense, so it’s not necessarily about looking for a God, or a figure for guidance, it’s more like internal, and more like coming to like equilibrium, or in a way kind of peaceful with oneself. So, in that way to me that’s also sacred, it seems like something that is in itself also divine, and also something that can be worth to look for.”

Interviewee VI actively connected queerness to the sacred, explaining in detail how queerness influences the view on religion and spirituality:

“When I think about queerness and sacredness together, [...] I feel like it can be this really beautiful concept to acknowledge just how amazing something is. [...] Even if people humiliate you and belittle you and ridicule you, they can’t take away the fact that your existence is sacred and the fact that you just are who you are is as wonderful as it is, so I feel like that can be a way how I can see space for a concept of sacred in a context of queerness”

This shows, how making use of the term “sacred” can enable a broader discourse on religion and spirituality and thereby encompass the individual experiences of the intangible and the larger-than-self, as opposed to focusing on distinguishing religion from spirituality. As such, the concept of sacredness can be a part of the discourse on both of spirituality and religion and used in combination with the theory of lived spirituality. In the following, I show how the respondents made use of these understandings of spirituality.

### **3.6 RECONSTRUCTIONS OF SPIRITUALITY**

As we have now established, the respondents’ understanding of a personal search process to find their own identity, their personal history with spirituality and religion, and their reflection upon those processes are vital to understand and connect with the practices of lived spirituality performed by the individuals. As such, the adoption of spiritual or religious practices does not take place without an elaborate reflection on those practices. As this reflection process takes place from the viewpoint of the intersections of gender and sexuality on the one hand, and religion and spirituality on the other, the practices performed need to be compatible with the queer identity of the respondents. Therefore, these practices are reinterpreted to align with the political beliefs of the interviewees. At the same time the respondents advocated for the adoption of scientific methods and a closer connection to nature. The practices are also

consciously used as functional tools to bring about a process of reflecting on the self, that focused on the individual and personal needs of the interviewees for a spiritual connection. However, for many of the respondents the process of finding this connection is still ongoing and, similarly to the search for their own identity, framed as a searching process.

### **3.6.1 *Searching Process***

Many of the respondents mentioned during the interviews, that the spiritual practices they performed were adopted as part of their spiritual journey. Although interviewee I did not practice any rituals connected to spirituality, they pointedly described how they thought many people were searching for meaning in other things and searching for their own identity:

“I think everyone is searching for something, kind of like a deeper meaning in life or something like that. [...] I guess I’m searching like for kind of truth, or a kind of idea that really fits with me and I’m kind of yeah, I’m on a journey to figure out what I really want, I guess that’s the process of searching. Also searching for a community, [...] searching for some kind of connection with people, yeah. [...] But it’s also kind of like a soul-searching type of thing, like learning more about myself and what I need and where I can get it”

Other respondents were clearer on the fact that it was a spiritual connection they were searching for. Interviewee III for example stated that he was very much searching for a spiritual aspect in his life: “I think that there’s a part of me that is spiritual for sure, and there is a part of me that wants to connect to something bigger. And wants to explore that.” He described this process as his “spiritual research and struggles” and explained how he got to the point he was at now, on his journey to find the right spirituality for himself:

”I kind of felt atheist for a while, but I needed some spirituality like, it felt like there was a part that wasn’t like a huge part of my life but it was significant enough for me to look for something else, and then I sort of reconstructed spirituality in my own head, in what it means to be spiritual, and I kind of arrived to witchcraft I guess, like yeah, I don’t know, I’ve been looking at it also from a cultural perspective, in generational perspective and I’ve been, like lately my main quest on spirituality is reconnecting and making sense of Western Slavic paganism, and reconnecting in terms of feeling like I would be included in that.”

The respondent also explained what this search entailed, saying: “this has been my spirituality for the last couple of months, maybe a year or so, like trying to figure out how a person like me would even fit into this yeah, this culture.” He thereby made very clear that the process was led by the urge to find a spirituality, that would be compatible with his queerness.

Interviewee VI clarified, that it was difficult for them to find the right spirituality, as they were



missing the right framework: “as a child I really enjoyed spirituality and then at one point I moved away from the framework that I had for that and I basically haven’t found a new framework.” They did however say, that spirituality did play a role in their life, albeit not being central for them at the moment: “On some level spirituality still plays a relatively big role in my life, like in my everyday life. [...] But at the same time, I feel like I’m not actively pursuing that a lot. Like where yeah, I think there are small moments, that I now more often framed as mindfulness, of just being aware of things, and doing things very purposefully.” The interviewee also underlined the fact, that they are currently not practicing any spiritual rituals as such: “I do have this interest and at the same time I’m like, I’m not actively trying to figure things out, I’m not actively engaging in those rituals as rituals in that moment.”

Finally, respondent VII was very clear on the fact, that she was currently actively engaging with her spirituality and was in the process of searching for a spirituality that was compatible with her queer identity. However, she pointedly described it as “something I’ve not come to final terms with to be honest, so it’s like difficult to articulate something that is still like an ongoing process.” The interviewee went into more detail to describe how she experienced this spiritual journey so far: “Spirituality is something that I used to not have at all. [...] The older I got the more I also got involved in other things and I kind of found my own voice. It’s almost like listening to something that is much more internal and much more like the core of who I am.” She then went on to explain how this search can be ongoing and never-ending:

“I’m really not at the final stage, I don’t know if I’ll ever be in the final stage, where I can say, I believe this and this and this and these are you know, the confinements of my beliefs. That’s why I’m always kind of struggling, when it gets to taking up these kind of spaces like queer spirituality, [...] and maybe that’s also kind of what it’s about, that it’s more of a journey, than you’re finally ever at a final point.”

Respondent II however, made clear, that they had found the right spirituality that gave them fulfilment. While this does not necessarily have to mark the end of their spiritual journey, it is a point at which they are happy with where they are currently at. They said: “for a long time I was kind of like looking for something that would make sense to me, how I could see the world in more than just purely scientific terms and when I found Judaism I just, everything I learn about it, it just gives me this yeah, great sense of fulfilment, so a bit like a drug almost. And it makes me incredibly happy.”

### ***3.6.2 Practices of Lived Spirituality***

As we have now analysed the process that has led the queer respondents to the place they are at today when it comes to the topic of spirituality, we can turn to see which practices they

perform and how they are implemented into their lives. Some of the overarching themes that were observable from the practices of the respondents were connection, reflection, self-care, and a connection to traditional religious rituals. Some of the interviewees also performed religious rituals, such as fasting, going to Sunday services, or celebrating the Sabbath. However, as they were not the only practices these respondents performed, and they took place largely apart from a religious group, we shall continue to categorize them as lived spirituality. Apart from that it was also possible to see the very personalised and individual aspect these practices of lived spirituality had for the interviewees.

From the interviews it became very clear that the *individual* aspect of spirituality is central to the practices of the respondents. This however is only the current state of the development, as many respondents explained how they were still searching for a community. As interviewee III said: “these days like my rituals, my spirituality so another word out there, like they’re not connected to any community, they’re solitary.”. He also spoke about the spiritual practice of herbalism as something that helped him reconnect with himself:

“It’s not really a something like that I do by calendar or anything, but something that I’ve been kind of learning about, when it comes to spirituality of Slavs, is that the line between spiritual and mundane is kind of blurred. [...] Let’s say that I am like I have been feeling pretty shitty for the last couple of days, right, and I’m like ‘ok, let’s reassess, like let’s reconnect with myself kind of’ and then I would like probably... what would I put into a tea to reconnect with myself? [...] I will mix some hibiscus, honey, some pepper, cause I want it to be fast, cinnamon, like just things that I associate with feeling with like confidence, and like feeling good. And then I will be like ok good, now it’s time to meditate while drinking this tea, and then I’m just going to be like, alright what’s going on, like inside of me. So yeah, I guess that’s like the kind of ritual, that I would do. [...] It’s more like a tool and less like a custom.”

Interviewee III thereby brought up spiritual practices as functional *tools*. He made clear, that these practices for him stood in opposition to periodic religious rituals: “ritual as a tool, rather than something that happens, just because it happens every Sunday, [...], like it’s an opposition”. This interpretation will be explored in more detail in chapter 4.2. Interviewee VI also understood spirituality to be intertwined with *reflection*, as they said: “you [...] quiet down and reflect and take a moment for yourself [...], and you do get those insights, emotional or otherwise, [...] that feels like a spiritual experience for me.” The reflection process itself as even understood as a spiritual practice itself by participant VII, who explained: “to me spirituality are the many little things, so for example that the self-reflection, kind of constant putting things into consciousness, like things that you unconsciously do, or things that you believe unconsciously, [...] it’s almost like a constant conversation with yourself.” She also

explained how the practice of fasting helped her in this reflection process, saying: “When you’re fasting [...] you have to think about what you’re doing, and you’re thinking about the emotions you’re feeling, because nothing, you can’t do anything else, it’s really difficult to see it as anything else. At least for me [...] it’s been quite the spiritual process, or like spiritually engaging.” In another way, respondent V described how nature could also be a catalyst for reflection:

“Consciously existing is for me a very religious thing. [...] I live in Bielefeld and here we have the [...] forest, which is very beautiful and I don’t know, he was not the one who came up with it, but my dad sometimes calls the forest, or forests, or nature, the green cathedral, I think that’s just a general term, and it is for me very spiritual to walk in nature, to, on my own, to be able to reflect, to also to see things, to see beauty”

Not only self-reflection was a common theme among the interviewees, but also the feeling of being at peace, as respondent IV said:

“In Groningen [...] there were times, where I was like at the end of the day, I was like ‘yes, this was a great day’. I was really at peace, I didn’t think about one second, about anything negative, I didn’t have any anxiety, the only time where I felt like I didn’t have to censor myself, the same with my sister, I always feel like this, I feel good, I feel like I can have self-expression, that’s when I feel at peace, when I’m a hundred percent myself and nothing bad is happening.”

Another important aspect of spiritual practices for her was the usage of them as a form of self-care, as she said: “even though it technically has a spiritual meaning, [...] it can be a self-care ritual as well.” This could entail various different practices, as she went on to describe: “I love taking baths. [...] The very commercialised things is also nice, just doing some skin care, or like hair care. [...] It really helps when I get really anxious about things. [...] Some people say it’s not good to say that, but I do love Yoga, I have to say that, because that really helps with my ADHD [...] and then like do like other things like, doing some meditation.” The interviewee then explained how she understood these practices to be spiritual: “I’m doing a herbalism course at the moment, which also is kind of spirituality, because yeah, like it’s really interesting to know what those herbs can do and stuff, I don’t know, and like I said, I do them in my bath and then I’m like, like thinking about the stuff of myself, and bathing in the good thoughts.”

Interviewee VII recounted which spiritual practices she performed, while also making clear, that she was performing them individually, rather than as a part of a religious community: “Why I was intrigued by the idea of fasting [...] because I wanted to use the time to kind of

reflect on myself and think about what, so what fasting can do for people. [...] It was a little bit of a spiritual [...] moment, that I thought, maybe I need to sit with the discomfort of having total control of what I'm consuming, by not consuming anything." She thereby consciously chose to take part in the activity of Ramadan for personal reasons, as she explained that it helped her reflect. Another practice she performed, was also connected to reflection, namely being thankful before consuming a meal:

"Every time I start eating, [...] I usually [...] think consciously of the fact that I am not basically eating, and I'm kind of showing a little bit of gratitude towards this. [...] And I think it is in that way also a little bit connected to spirituality, that it has to do with like showing gratitude for what you have, being aware that it's not necessarily the case for everyone and every time. [...] I see a connection to my political beliefs and like more core beliefs, that I have. [...] There's something about activism and that kind of organizing and all that, that it's almost a little bit, almost spiritual, yeah, I think that's kind of connected to that, so for me personally as well, I always thought, those were contradicting things, but now that I've also been in this ritual fasting, [...] I can now see that they're actually quite intertwined for me."

It thereby became clear that the reflection process is connected to her political beliefs and identity. The respondent also emphasized the process of finding spiritual meaning through the reflection, and how it has been a process to find a spiritual practice that is compatible with her identity. She explained: "fasting just such a simple act, I think has done a lot for me spiritually, I have had to really reflect and think about myself and I guess it has to do with existential questions as well."

Similarly, interviewee V also felt close to some classic religious rituals, as he recounted the practices he took part in, or performed:

"I sometimes listen to the Taizé prayers, [...] and sometimes also listen to the meditations from there, but also from a lot of other places. To me, [...] like a sermon is an important thing in a service, like when I find a church. And I used to go to church every Sunday, but I've lapsed a bit in the past year, because I moved to Bielefeld and to me, going to a church without a community is basically useless, no matter how good the service is. And going to an online church like here in Bielefeld is basically the same as going to an empty church. And going to an actual empty church and burning a candle, like that is very valuable to me, like that's a thing I do sometimes particularly if I'm worked up or something like that, like when I lived in Munich, I went to a lot of protests, [...] so before or after I would often go to a church and burn a candle to reflect for a moment, those kind of things. So, [...] the sermon is very important and [...] the singing and the organ playing needs to be ok and the sermon needs to be good."

As such, traditional Christian rituals played a large role in his life. However, he also took part in less traditional practices that were closer to his personal queer identity, as he went on to recount another important part of his religiosity:

“a lot of religious action for me at least happens in places where not everybody has the same religion, like I was talking yesterday with somebody online, I’m in a Discord server which is a questioning Discord server for trans people, and like somebody came in and she [...] really disliked herself for being trans, and I talked with her for two hours over chat. [...] I am quite literally doing this for religious reasons, because to me at least, like these kind of things are absolutely a part of being a practicing Christian, being there for other people, even in contexts, where it is not immediately obvious. [...] And like in, I know that there’s like a lot of suffering in the world and helping people, who are like struggling with their gender, like figure themselves out, like talking with them, like talking through, and giving them resources, that is doing like a lot of good in the world, so for me that is also a very obvious thing to do.”

Respondent V was thereby not only influenced by his own queer identity, but also the political implications of his actions from an intersectional standpoint. He summed up his practices as being “a bit vague, it’s very every day. I don’t, like I know some people who like take 5 minutes every day to pray, I don’t really do that, it’s more spontaneous than that.” This becomes even clearer when taking into account his earlier referral to walks in nature as a spiritual practice. These practices, be they described as religious or spiritual, thereby fall in line with what we have categorised as lived spirituality. Another interviewee who performed rituals associated with institutionalised religions was respondent II, who practiced traditional Jewish customs:

“Every Friday night I light my sabbath candle, I say prayer and I bless the wine, and I participate in a sabbath service and I do it every week, and I think it brings me a lot of meaning, it helps a lot in the term that before I was doing it kind of I felt every week was just kind of passing by, I didn’t really have like a real sense of time, but now I have like an anchor in a way, and by repeating it, it just gives me sense, a better sense of time, and yeah, it also just makes me think about what I do with my time actually. Yeah, and I don’t know also when I participate in rituals that are already quite old, it just makes me feel incredibly connected with all the other people who did it before me, in like a very much, I don’t know transcendental way. Something that spans across time.”

The structuring of time was also brought up by interviewee VI, who first described rituals in general, without necessarily having a spiritual connection, and then went on to explain how spiritual practices came in. They said: “I do have sort of like kind of like rituals for getting ready in the morning and like getting ready for bed in the evening sort of to signal to myself

that there is a specific phase of the day right now, but yeah, where I'm still looking for rituals to maybe also mark to myself that I am in a specific mood or in a specific like state of mind or something, or a specific state of my life also." They then explained how rituals to structure time were not present in the lived of queer people:

"especially in the context of queerness, it really makes me think that for so many things that belong to the queer experience, we don't have specific rituals, and that I feel like people are often, or like a lot of queer people are looking for that, and I also find that a little bit in myself, where I feel like for a lot of life markers that are more associated with being straight, or having like, or leading like a heteronormative life, we do have these kind of rituals, and I mean some of those have become, have been incorporated into queer life, right? So, like when queer people get married, they often follow similar rituals as when straight people get married, right? Even though, like sometimes it's a bit adaptive, but yeah, there's a lot of overlap, but for example we don't really have rituals for when you're coming out or something"

Spiritual practices were also connected to the notion of time by interviewee II, who described how some spiritual practices would allow them to feel closer to their ancestors:

"I actually had a little bit of a spiritual experience in the last few months, where I was cooking and I was using this cook book that's like a traditional [...] cook book and while I was making it made me feel like incredibly kind of connected to my ancestors, because I knew that this was like literally how they would knead a dough, or this is what recipe they would use. [...] And I think that's incredibly spiritual for me."

They then went on to explain how things were only perceived as being spiritual in hindsight, rather than interpreting them as such in the given moment: "I just do things, and then later I realize how I feel about them, and sometimes it feels spiritual, you know, and sometimes it feels religious. Yeah, it's actually quite interesting, I wouldn't say that I think so much about those things, but just like sometimes, like with the cooking you know? But I don't label it maybe necessarily as spiritual when it happens."

The respondents therefore had specific individual reasons to explore and try out the spiritual practices they performed. They did however also explain, how the process of finding these practices was part of a long journey, that many of the respondents did not see themselves as being at the end of.

### **3.6.3 *Science and Nature***

Another observation that I made while analysing the interviews, that cannot be included in any other category, was the involvement with the realm of science. As such, some interviewees saw

nature as a way to embrace spirituality, while others saw the fascination with nature as a different way to approach the search for a spiritual connection itself.

Respondent II described spiritual experiences in connection to nature as “natural occurrences, a feeling of awe that someone can feel like, when they see the northern lights for the first time, or when they see like really beautiful waterfall and then make them think about how nature works, and how they are part of nature, I don’t know. Those are like kind of spiritual experiences.” They thereby connected with nature as something bigger than the self, that can still be experienced. Interviewee V also saw parallels between nature and spirituality by saying “it is for me very spiritual to walk in nature, to, on my own, to be able to reflect, to also to see things, to see beauty.” While talking about spirituality, respondent VI also explained how nature could evoke that feeling: “the fact that evolution works the way it does, and the human mind works the way it does, like that we can find sense in everything, like that in itself is sort of magical to me.”

Not only nature was a common theme among the respondents’ interpretation of spirituality, but also science. Like many others, interviewee III made clear, that being spiritual does not change anything about the scientific view of the world, as he said: “I think that there is a part of me that kind of comes from the scientific view of... things have to be objective, you know that everything has to be about scientific method and if it cannot be [...] confirmed or rejected by the scientific method then it cannot be real.” He then continued to say: “there is a part of me that is a scientific mind and there’s a part of me that is a spiritual pagan witch, and they are one and the same person”, underlining the fact, that one does not exclude the other. Respondent IV also made a bit clearer what this scientific view should include: “it should be like kind of like an enlightenment kind of thing, like it was like in enlightenment age, but not with of course white dudes, but you know what I mean, like kind of the core essence of it is that you need like *Aufklärung*.”

However, although he felt a connection to nature, as stated above, interviewee V saw the difference between science and spirituality in the fact, that the latter focuses on experience, rather than abstract theory, as he said: “it’s not a scientific truth, it’s about experience, it’s about making sense of the world, and then you have to see what works.” As such, nature and science differ in the way that while one can be experienced in a spiritual way, the other cannot. It can however be the basis from which the connection with a spirituality is felt or a spiritual practice is adopted.

Respondent I, who stated that they did not feel spiritual in any way, did on the other hand

explain how nature could be an alternative outlet for the need for the connection to something larger than the self:

“I really appreciate science and I find so much wonder and marvel and delight and like also existential like questions in the pursuit of science. [...] Like there’s so much wonder out there, so I don’t see the point of searching for that sort of excitement or that sort of like broader perspective in these things that I would consider to be like intangible, and yeah, the, basic, not of this world”.

Nature and spirituality therefore played a large role in the spiritualities of the respondents. However, none of them actively performed rituals or practices directly related to nature, but rather saw nature and science as an underlying truth, that could be made compatible with spirituality, but could also be seen as distinctly different.

#### **4 INTERPRETATION**

We have now seen how the participants framed the processes of finding their queer and spiritual identity as individual journeys. As they had made negative experiences with religion and spirituality, they reconstructed spirituality in line with their queer identity. While community was an important aspect of the respondents lives, none of them were currently exploring their spiritual practices within such a framework.

After analysing the data and structuring the observations we can now turn to their interpretation in the context of other literature and research projects. I shall therefore firstly give a brief overview over the existing literature on the subject analysed in this research project. The data is then analysed in two steps, firstly by focusing on the understanding of practices of lived spirituality by the queer feminist respondents within the framework of a lived spirituality. Secondly, I examine the spiritual journeys of the queer interviewees and their implications these practices and searching processes have for spiritual care.

##### **4.1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

When reviewing the existing literature on the subject, several points can be observed. As the research focuses on the spiritualities of feminist queers, it is shedding light on the intersection of spirituality or religion and queerness. At first glance, this intersection looks like a unique and specific case. When taking a closer look however, the intersections of feminism, queerness and spirituality are discussed in a variety of works. However, in the community observed, the Groningen Feminist Network, intersectionality plays a central role as a form of reflection on the self and others. Much of the literature on the topics surrounding this research however, focus on only parts of these intersections, making it necessary to make use of literature on



individual aspects of spirituality, religion, queerness, feminism, or intersections between only few of them.

### **Religion and Spirituality**

When it comes to spirituality and religion, Peter Hill et al.<sup>52</sup> conceptualised the two concepts, coming to the conclusion, that while both were often seen as distinct, they shared various commonalities, and it was often difficult to separate the two. However, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in their ground-breaking book *The Spiritual Revolution*<sup>53</sup>, indicated an ongoing subjective turn, the change from following teachings by institutions to living life in accordance with individual and personal journeys with spirituality.

As spirituality and religion share common ground, this research is concerned with the specific realm of practices that can be categorised as being part of a lived spirituality or lived religion. Ganzevoort and Roeland, in their article *Lived Religion*<sup>54</sup> underline praxis as the main focus of practical theology. The authors thereby highlight the actions and rituals performed by the individuals, choosing an inductive angle starting from their personal experiences. Nancy Ammermann conducted similar research in her book called *Sacred Stories*<sup>55</sup>, calling these practices “spiritual practices of everyday life”. She thereby makes even more clear that these practices or rituals are not necessarily connected to a larger context and are tailored to the individuals needs and experiences. Meredith McGuire combines the two notions of lived religion and everyday spirituality in her book *Lived Religion*<sup>56</sup>, where she combines the two concepts to facilitate the conceptualisation of these practices.

A case study that is also relevant to the research conducted here, is the work of the author Kristin Aune<sup>57</sup>, who analysed spiritual practices of feminists and also categorised them as a form of lived religion. However, here we see again, how feminism and lived spirituality are analysed, however the aspect of queerness was not focused upon, as the respondents consisted of heterosexual and queer people. Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead<sup>58</sup> also focused on the connection between the female gender and spirituality, showing how self-expression and living one’s life for the self and not for others, rather than adhering to traditional interpretations of

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<sup>52</sup> Hill, “Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality”, pp. 51–77.

<sup>53</sup> Heelas, P., et al. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Blackwell, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Ganzevoort R., and Roeland J., “Lived Religion”, pp. 91-101.

<sup>55</sup> Ammermann, N., *Sacred Stories*.

<sup>56</sup> McGuire, M. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Aune K. “Feminist Spirituality As Lived Religion: How UK Feminists Forge Religio-Spiritual Lives.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2015, pp. 122–145.

<sup>58</sup> Sointu, E., and Woodhead, L. “Spirituality, Gender, and Expressive Selfhood.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2008, pp. 259–276.

femininity, has made them more susceptible to spiritual practices. The author Melissa Wilcox analysed queer spiritual groups in Los Angeles in her book *Queer Women and Individualism*<sup>59</sup>, although taking into account solely the experiences of queer women, thereby reiterating a very binary view on gender. She did however make the observation that for her interviewees the journey to find their gender identity and sexuality was similar to the journey they described to find their personal spirituality or religion and understood as individual processes, albeit associated with the more negatively connotated capitalist understanding of individualism. As Wilcox focused on those queer people who were already part of a spiritual or religious community, she distinguished four functions that these communities can fulfil: they can be tools, tiles, community and memory. While tiles, which refer to the individuals as part of the authors metaphor of community as a mosaic are not relevant to this research, the functions of tools and community can be recognized as something that my own respondents brought up. However, Wilcox understands tools as theoretical frameworks that can be applied to the spiritual lives of the individual. Therefore, what the author describes as a tool can be compared with what I have distinguished in this research as an intersectional feminist lens and not the functional use, such as what my interviewees described their practices of lived spirituality to be. An inclusive community is something that many of my respondents strived to have, but had not yet found. Similarly, the aspect of memory was found across my interviews, as this memory could also include the connection to a community, regardless of time (or place).

### **Queer Spirituality?**

As we have seen, the practices adopted by the individuals interviewed, were consciously chosen in light of their own personal queer identity. As such, we must analyse the intersection of queerness and spirituality. While Yvonne Aburrow<sup>60</sup> made a strong case for the understanding of a coherent “queer spirituality” in her article *Is it Meaningful to Speak of ‘Queer Spirituality’?*, arguing that queer people have distinct experiences and approach spirituality and religion differently than heteronormative people would. Peter Sweasey, in his 1997 book *From Queer to Eternity*<sup>61</sup>, focused on the queer access point to spirituality, brings up the point of queer people often having various personal histories with institutional religions

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<sup>59</sup> Wilcox, M. *Queer Women and Religious Individualism*. Indiana University Press, 2009.

<sup>60</sup> Aburrow, Y. “Is it Meaningful to Speak of ‘Queer Spirituality’?: An Examination of Queer and LGBT Imagery and Themes in Contemporary Paganism and Christianity”, in: Hunt, Stephen. *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities*. Ashgate Pub, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Sweasey, P. *From Queer to Eternity: Spirituality in the Lives of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People*. Cassell, 1997.

and spiritualities. Claudio Bardella<sup>62</sup> on the other hand sees queer spirituality as more fluid, as queer people are just as diverse as the spiritualities or religions they connect with, and do not form a homogenous group. It is my opinion, that while queer people do make distinct experiences throughout their lifetimes, that heteronormative people may not, queer people do not constitute a homogenous group. I therefore do not use the term “queer spirituality”, but focus on the individual experienced the respondents shared with me during the interviews. While my respondents all made use of an intersectional feminist perspective to interpret their own identity and the world around them, other queer people may not apply such a theory to their lives.

### **Spirituality and Activism**

Case Studies<sup>63</sup> similar to the one conducted here are often concerned with the connection between spirituality or religious action and activism, rather than with those cases where the spiritual practices are separate from activism, and have only influenced each other through the reflection process that has come out of the examination of the own queer identity infused with an intersectional lens. While these case studies come close to parts of the topics observed in this research, such as the connection between political activism and spirituality, there remain distinct differences. While the research by Zwissler e.g., seems similar in the way that it also constitutes a case study of feminist activists in a specific city, the book focuses on activists that mainly take part in structured group settings. It also includes queer - or LGBTIQ+ - respondents in the research, however it does not do so exclusively and those who are included identify among others as gay or lesbian, as opposed to queer. In the research presented in this thesis however, the starting point is queerness, as this is at the root of the respondent’s identities. The biggest difference between the two research projects lies in the fact that while Zwissler’s interviewees have found communities that are compatible with their identities, the respondents to my research are still mostly searching for a spiritual or religious path on the other.

### **Spiritual Care**

When it comes to spiritual care for queer people, as Derek Jay<sup>64</sup> suggests, queer people are likely to have more self-awareness than heteronormative people. The author also comes to the

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<sup>62</sup> Bardella, C. “Queer Spirituality.” *Social Compass*, vol. 48, no. 1, 2001, pp. 117–138.

<sup>63</sup> Zwissler, L. *Religious, Feminist, Activist: Cosmologies of Interconnection*. University of Nebraska Press, 2018. | Stanczak, G. *Engaged Spirituality: Social Change and American Religion*. Rutgers University Press, 2006. | Nynäs P. and Lassander, M. “LGBT Activism and Reflexive Religion: A Case Study from Finland in the Light of Social Movements Theory.” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2015, pp. 453–471.

<sup>64</sup> Jay, D. “Trends in the Spiritual Direction for LGBT People”, in: Hunt, S. *Contemporary Christianity and LGBT Sexualities*. Ashgate Pub, 2009.

conclusion that queer people can shape their own spirituality in accordance with their own experiences. Jason Hays, in the book *Understanding Pastoral Counselling*<sup>65</sup>, gives a variety of guidelines for how to challenge typical heteronormative assumptions and open up the field of pastoral care to queer theory outside of Christian contexts. In a similar fashion, Larry Graham, in his article *Caregiving and Spiritual Direction with Lesbian and Gay Persons*<sup>66</sup> advises the spiritual care-giver to evaluate their own attitudes towards queerness, explore the impact of internalized queerphobia, and understand the connection between gender identity/sexuality and spirituality. In her article *Social Work and Spirituality*<sup>67</sup>, Beth Crisp analyses what she calls “lived experiences”, and is of the opinion that social workers should also provide spiritual care. She also argues that framing spiritual practices as “lived experiences” enables the avoidance of religious or spiritual language, which allows the provider of spiritual care to be more inclusive.

#### 4.2 QUEER FEMINIST LIVED SPIRITUALITY

When analysing how the respondents made use of practices of lived spirituality, the theory of a spiritual revolution, as expressed by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, may be of use to the research. Parts of the theory presented in their book “The Spiritual Revolution” help us untangle and structure the observations made during the interviews. The theory introduced by the authors heavily relies on the understanding of the so-called “subjective turn”. This is defined as the “turn away from life lived in terms of external or ‘objective’ roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences”<sup>68</sup> and constitutes a major development in current Western European culture.<sup>69</sup> As such, what they call individual-life spirituality is understood as “seeking out, experiencing and expressing a source of significance which lies within the process of life itself”<sup>70</sup>, which focuses on the individual’s journey through life.<sup>71</sup> This understanding, when interpreted side by side with the theory of lived spirituality, lies in the difference between rituals performed before the larger backdrop of a religion and spiritual practices defined as lived spirituality. We can therefore analyse the practices performed by the respondents of the interviews I conducted and interpret them in light

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<sup>65</sup> Hays, “Pastoral Counselling and Queer Identities”, pp. 327-351.

<sup>66</sup> Graham L. “Caregiving and Spiritual Direction with Lesbian and Gay Persons: Common Themes and Sharp Divergencies.” *Journal of Pastoral Care*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1996, pp. 97–104.

<sup>67</sup> Crisp, B. *Spirituality and Social Work*. Taylor and Francis, 2016.

<sup>68</sup> Heelas/Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Heelas/Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, pp. 2-5.

<sup>70</sup> Heelas/Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, p. 31.

<sup>71</sup> Heelas/Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution*, p. 1-31.

of the understanding of a subjective turn, towards individual spiritual practices.

The book “From Queer to Eternity” by Peter Sweasey also contains such individual experiences of queer people and their relation to spirituality and religion. Sweasey’s interviewees show significant parallels to what I have observed in the interviews conducted for this research. Through the interviews conducted by the author, he searches for answers to questions, such as why queer people choose to be spiritual and how the queer identity is compatible with spirituality. As such, we can find in the experiences laid down in Sweasey’s book the parallels of being excluded from spiritual and religious communities<sup>72</sup> and the subsequent focus on individual experiences. As all of my respondents have made distinct negative experiences with religion and spirituality in relation to their gender identity and/or sexuality, they emphasize the very personal and individual aspect of their relation with religion and spirituality. Peter Sweasey also discerns the unique ability of queer people to be critical of religion and spirituality due to not fitting in as who they are.<sup>73</sup> Sweasey thereby also emphasizes the “crucial process of questioning and turning within”<sup>74</sup> as “the feeling of not being able to identify fully with the surrounding world”<sup>75</sup>, such as queerness, as a catalyst for this process. One important point is not taking “truths” that are often proclaimed in spiritual or religious contexts as moral or ethical guidelines.<sup>76</sup> As he states, “That heterosexual convention is not the sole Way, Truth and Life – that there are other ways of [...] living – is the fundamental queer insight.”<sup>77</sup> This also allows queer people to “ask questions about ourselves and our place in the world. [...] The spiritual journey is an inner one: our head starts is that we can understand it as such, because we are guided by internal, rather than external authority.”<sup>78</sup> as one of Sweasey’s respondents said. This also requires them to value and follow their own experiences to find to their own identity.<sup>79</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapter, the queer gender identities and sexualities form a major part of the individual’s selfhood and relate strongly to other parts of their lives, and have led to a better understanding of and yearning for authenticity and closeness to self.

If we compare the internal vs. external authority and the validity of personal experience to the theory by Heelas and Woodhead, we can see that queerness presupposes a very subjective viewpoint towards life and therefore also spirituality. As such, even the respondents who felt a

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<sup>72</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>73</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 41.

<sup>74</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 28.

<sup>75</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 28.

<sup>76</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 29.

<sup>77</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 51.

<sup>79</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, pp. 35-38.

connection to a (world) religion interpreted their practices very individually and implemented only those rituals that had meaning to them and helped them in their everyday lives. However, the focus on the individual experiences of being queer and being on the journey of searching for a connection to a spirituality or religion constitute a distinct intersection of identity markers. This intersection on the one hand addresses the needs of the individual as a queer person and on the other hand shows the search for a community to explore and understand that search with.

Approaching the subject from a different angle, the author Kristin Aune analysed how feminists in the United Kingdom viewed and connected with spirituality. Based on the research by Heelas and Woodhead above, she also supports the claim, that individual-life spiritualities are especially favoured by women, as “their focus on the self is a corrective to traditional notions of femininity as self-sacrifice”<sup>80</sup> instead of seeing it as simply individualistic.<sup>81</sup> As queerness and intersectional feminism are part of the way the participants of my research, they construct their spiritual practice based on introspection and reflection, especially from an intersectional viewpoint.

Aune also argues for the conceptualization of feminist spirituality as lived religion, rather than seeing spirituality and religion as categorically distinct. She argues that the focus on individual experiences and the implementation of practices in everyday life makes such distinction difficult to retain.<sup>82</sup> During Aune’s research, she made three observations about the way feminists integrated spirituality into their lives: they were de-churched, relational, and emphasised practice.<sup>83</sup> The author proposes using the term ‘de-churched’ instead of ‘de-institutionalized’ or ‘de-Christianised’ to describe how her feminist respondents were not members of a church, as they had grown critical of the institution, had not found a personal meaning in the religion they were brought up with, or had made distinct personal experiences.<sup>84</sup> The de-institutionalization is something that we can recognize from the respondents from my interviews, as even those who consider themselves a part of a world religion, were (at the time of the interviews) not involved in institutionalised religious practices. I use the term de-institutionalization, as the terms ‘de-churched’ and ‘de-Christianised’ seem too Christian-centred for my own research, as we have seen that e.g., Islam is also centred around other factors, such as culture. I also find it difficult to conflate churches, that represent institutions and church buildings at the same time, with their respective equivalents in Islam or Judaism. Another observation by Aune was

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<sup>80</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, p. 126.

<sup>81</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, 125-126.

<sup>82</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, pp. 139-140.

<sup>83</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, pp. 122-123.

<sup>84</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, pp. 129-132.

the relational nature on their journey towards individual spiritualities. The author explains this relationality as the socialisation through peers.<sup>85</sup> This again, is something that shows clear parallels to my own research, as the author summarises: “feminists describe their movement away from the church as a decision shaped by and embedded in relationship networks”<sup>86</sup> and “Circumstances relating to their relationships also contributed to feminists changing their views about spirituality”<sup>87</sup>. While the relational aspect is also important for respondents of my research, with the GFN being held in high regard, it was primarily the accepting and educating nature of the group that led to its cherishing. While it is difficult to determine in which ways the participants influenced each other in the exploration of a form of spirituality, the GFN itself does not provide the space to explore the intersection of queerness and spirituality. However, the participation with the GFN, as we have seen in chapter 3.3, has led to the application of an intersectional framework to the identity of the individuals. This has also enabled them to apply this framework to other parts of their lives, including the adoption of spiritual practices, that we are interpreting as forms of lived spirituality. This leads us to the emphasis on practice, that constitutes Aune’s third observation. By ‘practices’, the author refers to those rituals and practices that we have described as actions of lived spirituality.<sup>88</sup>

Peter Sweasey also uses the term “tool” to describe the utilization of these practices, explaining the adoption of spiritual practices by queer people as follows: “spirituality is a useful tool. Queers are involved because they want to be, not because they feel they ought to be. Religion is assessed according to its utility rather than its claim to authority”<sup>89</sup>. However, it goes so far that the queer respondents not only make use of spiritual practices due to their utility, but vehemently scrutinize the authoritative notion of religion. The ways in which the practices of lived spirituality were utilized by the individuals were mainly giving themselves space to reflect and find and express authenticity, connecting to something larger than the self, such as a community, or to structure time.

As the practices of lived spirituality performed are informed by deeper *reflections* on the relation between the own queer identity and spiritual practices, this suggests that the respondents are influenced strongly by the subjective turn, as detailed above. However, a large part of the interviewees understanding of spirituality came from the notion of connecting to something bigger. What this could entail was different for the respondents, as it was connected

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<sup>85</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, pp. 132-135.

<sup>86</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, p. 132.

<sup>87</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, p. 133.

<sup>88</sup> Aune, “Feminist Spirituality”, pp. 135-138.

<sup>89</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 41.

to various contexts, such as community, or nature and science. The spiritual practices were therefore performed individually, but embedded in a larger context, and also consciously used as tools. The practices could thereby be utilized for a specific purpose whenever needed by the individual. But they could also be interpreted as spiritual practices in hindsight, rather than actively being applied. They did however often focus on the inner workings of the person and the needs of the self and others. This again shows how the political insight of intersectional feminism and the individual identity of being queer enabled the respondents to be very aware of themselves, but also their surroundings. This fundamental reflection process also distinguished the practices of lived spirituality by the queer feminist respondents, as it forms the basis of their spiritual journeys. Consequently, the interviewees were very critical of non-reflective spiritualities and the adoption of practices from different cultural contexts.

As we previously defined, spirituality is understood as a search for the sacred, whereas not all interviewees felt comfortable using that phrase. For many of them, spirituality was understood as the *connection to something larger than the self*. This included being part of accepting communities. At the same time, the size of the group did not play a role, as time was also a factor that was not relevant. Therefore, this connection could be felt with people all over the world, with people from the past, or even with people from the future. However, if this can be described as sacred is a difficult question, as that depends on the distinct perceptions of the individuals. Another form of connecting to something bigger that came up was the experience of nature. As queer people are not accepted in many parts of society due to their queerness, they require the larger-than-self entity to either be explicitly accepting of their identities, or allow a reinterpretation of these contexts to make them compatible with the own gender identity and/or sexuality.

The practices of lived spirituality were also applied by some of the interviewees as *tools*, that could be applied whenever needed, thereby constituting functional rituals. As such, they were used to better reflect on the self, come to peace, feel authentic, or even structure time. As respondent VI mentioned earlier, while heteronormative people have rituals and occasional services that structure the life of such a person, such as baptism, confirmation, and marriage, such practices are not in common use among queer people. While marriage e.g., is sometimes also reinterpreted, reclaimed, or restructured in a way that is more compatible with a less heteronormative lifestyle, there are often no frameworks to further explore such practices. This is something that is further explored in chapter 4.3.

The respondents of my research are searching for a framework that can lead them and help them understand their own spiritual journeys, while at the same time strongly focusing on their



individual needs and reflecting on and reinterpreting practices of lived spirituality. These journeys can therefore be understood as individual and subjective. Performing these practices thereby constitutes an active and conscious choice to (re-)connect with a spirituality or religion. All interviewees had had a framework for religion or spirituality at one point in their lives. This framework was however tainted by the implicit and explicit negative experiences. Nevertheless, the interviewees actively choose to search for spiritual practices that allow the incorporation of their queer identities, searching for the connection to something bigger than the self. As many of the respondents have made negative experiences both with spirituality and religion, but still actively engage with spiritual practices in accordance with their queer identity, I choose to label these journeys as subjective and individual *reconstructions of spirituality*.

We can now outline several distinctions that characterize the queer feminist spiritual practices performed by the participants of my case study:

- 1 The practices of lived spirituality performed by the queer participants are individual and subjective. They thereby also relate strongly to the queer identities of the individuals.
2. The queer respondents' practices of lived spirituality are actively sought *reconstructions* of spirituality. As most of the interviewees' contexts are de-churched, or de-institutionalised, they reconstruct these practices in line with their personal queer identity.
3. The respondents actively *reflect* on themselves and potential spiritual practices within their contexts with the aid of an intersectional feminist lens. They are also decidedly critical of non-reflexive spiritualities.
4. For the interviewees, the connection to something larger than the self constitutes a major element of spirituality. This includes the *relational* aspect distinguished by Aune, as the practices are performed in connection with a group of people in various forms.
5. The practices of lived spirituality performed are used as *tools*, either for specific purposes of reflection e.g., or to feel a sense of belonging within a spiritual framework that is compatible with the queer identities of the individuals.

After categorizing these observations, we are still left with another finding, namely the searching process to find a spiritual practice that fulfils these requirements and how it relates to the notion of community. The spiritual journeys of the queer respondents and how they relate to the implementation of spiritual care are therefore explored in the following sub-chapter.

#### **4.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL CARE**

The interviewees described their searching process to find the right spiritual practices, or group to explore those with, as a journey. This spiritual, or religious, journey, that is informed by a

process of searching for the right spiritual or religious practices and communities to fit with the personal queer identity was described as being similar to exploring his own gender identity. We could thereby see how the two searching processes can be very similar. However, while the respondents were guided in their search to find their own identity by the frameworks they found in queer activist group settings, such as the GFN, when it comes to spirituality, many of them had not yet found such a framework. Even those who had always been or had become closer currently missed the exploration or practice of such spiritual rituals within in-person group settings. As community holds a central function in the respondents' lives due to them being accepted for expressing themselves and living authentically, they are very aware of the positive impact such groups can have for their own identity. While not all of the interviewees were actively searching for a group setting to explore their spirituality within, they did locate their spiritual practices in certain traditions, such as witchcraft and herbalism, or other cultural or religious contexts. The GFN itself did not provide a space to talk about these spiritual journeys during its regular events. Only when some of the attendees of these meetings went out to a bar for a couple of drinks after an event was there space to talk about spirituality and religion, whereas those who were more outspoken about their spirituality or religion were more often involved in such talks than others.

Some of the respondents also utilized the rituals to structure time. This was explored in two ways, on the one hand on the microlevel of structuring days or weeks to be more aware of time passing. On the other hand, on a macrolevel, as respondent VI explained above, whereas they specifically brought up the absence of certain spiritual or religious rituals to guide queer people through their lives. While marriage is being reappropriated by some, other life markers, such as confirmation to signify adult maturity, or initiation rites into the community, such as baptisms are not practiced within the framework of the GFN.

It becomes clear, that while the respondents are, or were, actively engaged with the GFN and it helped them to find their own gender identity and/or sexuality, they do not have a close framework to explore their spiritual journey within. While internet communities may play a role as such a framework in the lives of the respondents, it is not in the scope of this research to determine its utilization as such. A close in-person community of interpersonal relations with others of a group however are currently not part of the respondents' spiritual journeys. This also makes it more difficult for the interviewees to explore spiritual practices, as the journeys are taken individually. And while some of the respondents were actively searching for a community of interpersonal relations to explore their spirituality within, others did not currently engage with this searching process because they did not have a group of peers to

reflect on them with. Being part of a group in a secular context, such as the GFN may lead the participants to struggle with reconciling the use of scientific method with the adoption of spiritual practices, as the two can be interpreted as being incompatible. As respondent V said above, they are however very well compatible in the way that science focuses on objective truths and spirituality is concerned with individual experiences. Therefore, as they relate to different realms of the individuals lives, they do not have to be mutually exclusive. And this also goes for the combination of a queer identity with spiritual or religious personal experiences; they can be reconciled and realigned in a way that does not require a repression of one of those parts.

This is where the relevancy of spiritual care comes into play, as such care practices can offer these perspectives to queer people, helping them explore practices of lived spirituality. From the observations I have analysed above, I distinguished five factors that should be taken into account by practitioners of spiritual care when interacting with queer people at the intersection of their queer identity and spirituality, such as those interviewed by me during this research:

1. The caregiver should critically reflect on their own values and morals, including the application of the theory of intersectionality.
2. The caregiver should provide a safe environment to talk about the practices and reflections of spirituality by the queer individuals. They should thereby be accepting of all gender identities and sexualities, including those that initially seem to cancel each other out.
3. The caregiver should make use of implicit assessment of spiritual practices such as those framed as lived spirituality to access these reflections and constructions from the individual. This is especially valuable in non-religious or secular contexts, as it does not require a knowledge or understanding of religiously laden language.
4. The caregiver should accompany and aid in the process of resolving identity conflicts, such as being queer and spiritual or religious.
5. The caregiver should provide or refer to communal spaces in which this intersecting identity can be explored with other peers.

When it comes to providing spiritual care, we should firstly start with the caregiver themselves, as “All therapeutic practice can [...] be seen to be influenced by underlying ideas or values about what it means to live well.”<sup>90</sup> The ideas and values of the caregiver therefore influence

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<sup>90</sup> Lynch, *Pastoral Care & Counselling*, pp. 9-10.

the practice of spiritual care. Therefore, all practitioners in the fields of therapeutic practices should reflect on themselves and their ontological and teleological presuppositions. This is what Deal and Magyar-Russell call “tacit assessment”. The authors state that “practicing ethically means first recognizing and becoming critically conscious of our own theological assumptions”<sup>91</sup> and “recognizing how we are socioculturally located [...]. Ultimately, this critical focus on the self is about learning how to be present and encounter the mystery of the other, without projecting and inflicting our own unresolved faith difficulties on those seeking care.”<sup>92</sup> When it comes to the provision of spiritual care for queer people, providers of such counselling should therefore reflect on and deconstruct their underlying assumptions about gender and sexuality, such as seeing sexuality as fixed and unchanging over time, or other binary or heteronormative assumptions. This also refers to their theological and spiritual commitments.<sup>93</sup> According to Burnes et al., providers of spiritual care should also “Be aware of the sociopolitical influences”<sup>94</sup> and “Recognize that gender identity formation, self-acceptance of transgender identity, and disclosure of transgender status are complex processes that are not necessarily permanently resolved and may be experienced repeatedly across one’s lifespan”<sup>95</sup>. The spiritual caregiver should thereby make use of intersectional theory, “recognizing and addressing how spirituality and religion intersect with racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression to inform individuals’ experiences with spirituality and religion.”<sup>96</sup> This reflection process of the caregiver is essential for the provision of spiritual care not only for the provider of such practices to become aware of their own preconceptions, but also to understand the reflection process queer people must undertake to understand and construct their own identity. Secondly, while offering spiritual care, the caregiver should provide a space in which all gender identities and sexualities are welcomed, respected, and understood. Although the author Judith Shelley locates her theory exclusively in Christianity, she provides us with several factors that are important while administering spiritual care. These include active listening, showing empathy, being vulnerable, exhibiting humility and displaying commitment towards the recipient.<sup>97</sup> While providing spiritual care to queer people, it is important to be

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<sup>91</sup> Deal, P. and Magyar-Russell, G. “Religious and Spiritual Assessment in Pastoral Counseling”, in: Maynard, E. and Snodgrass, J. (eds) *Understanding Pastoral Counseling*. Springer Publishing Company, 2015, p.117.

<sup>92</sup> Deal/Magyar-Russell, “Religious and Spiritual Assessment”, p.117.

<sup>93</sup> Hays, “Pastoral Counselling and Queer Identities”, pp. 332-333.

<sup>94</sup> [https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/competencies/algbtic\\_competencies.pdf](https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/competencies/algbtic_competencies.pdf), last accessed June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>95</sup> [https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/competencies/algbtic\\_competencies.pdf](https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/competencies/algbtic_competencies.pdf), last accessed June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>96</sup> Means, ““Keep Your Spirit Aligned””, p. 622.

<sup>97</sup> Shelly, *Spiritual Care*, pp. 75-86.

versed in intersectional theory, as it can help the spiritual caregiver understand the intersectionally constructed identities of those receiving counselling.

Thirdly, making use of what Deal and Magyar-Russell call “implicit assessment”, it can be helpful to approach the spiritual or religious aspects of the recipients through the theory of lived experience, or lived spirituality. This approach has “its strength in assessing those less versed or less comfortable with explicitly religious or spiritual language”<sup>98</sup> and also refers to “widening spiritual and religious assessment to include a broader range of syncretistic and nontraditional beliefs, practices, and experiences.”<sup>99</sup> For this, it can be of use to start the conversation by talking about rituals. These can be individually or communally practiced, be tied to certain events or dates, or surround everyday actions such as meals.<sup>100</sup>

The queer people that I interviewed had struggled, or were still struggling, to explore the intersection of their queerness and their spirituality. While few of them had found a framework in which to explore their spirituality in, others were missing a community of interpersonal relationships, where they could explore and express their queerness and spirituality at the same time. As Jodi O’Brien observed in a study of queer Christians many of them “talked passionately and at length about the ‘contradiction’ of being Christian and gay. They weren’t trying to resolve this contradiction; rather the contradiction defined how they saw themselves and their path in life. Grappling with the contradiction was an occasion for articulating an empowered new sense of themselves and their role in their religious communities.”<sup>101</sup> We have seen however, during the interviews conducted for this research, that this contradiction, or identity conflict was not only present in those from a Christian background, but also in those from other religious traditions. It can therefore fourthly be fruitful to help those struggling with such an intersecting identity to resolve this inner, and outer, conflict. The authors Levy and Reeves<sup>102</sup> discern a five-stage process to resolve such an identity conflict: 1. Becoming aware of the conflict, 2. Initial response (e.g., secrecy or deeper involvement), 3. A Catalyst moment (e.g. new information), 4. Working through the conflict, and 5. Resolution.<sup>103</sup> As I have shown at the beginning of this chapter the queer respondents saw similarities between their spiritual

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<sup>98</sup> Deal/Magyar-Russell, “Religious and Spiritual Assessment”, p.122.

<sup>99</sup> Deal/Magyar-Russell, “Religious and Spiritual Assessment”, p. 123.

<sup>100</sup> Crisp, B. “Social Work and Spirituality in a Secular Context”, *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 8 no. 4, (2008), p. 368.

<sup>101</sup> O’Brien, J. “Outing Religion in LGBT Studies”, in: Taylor, Y., and Snowdon, R. (eds) *Queering Religion: Religious Queers*. Routledge, 2014, p. xiii.

<sup>102</sup> Levy, D., and Reeves, P. “Resolving Identity Conflict: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing.” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2011, pp. 53–68.

<sup>103</sup> Levy/Reeves, “Resolving Identity Conflict”, pp. 58-64.

journey and the journey to find their gender identity and/or sexuality. Levy and Reeves observed something similar<sup>104</sup>, showing how both were “fluid and interactive”<sup>105</sup>. They were also of the opinion that professionals, such as providers of spiritual care could use this process by “normalizing their clients’ experiences, and, if they are able to identify where their clients are in the resolution process, they can introduce pertinent resources and information.”<sup>106</sup> The authors also state that “Helping professionals can assist clients in exploring the varied messages they receive from faith communities as they develop faith and sexual identity.”<sup>107</sup> One way to work through the conflict could be the reinterpretation of scripture and tradition, as Hays suggests: “This represents an important opportunity for pastoral counsellors working from liberative and emancipatory perspectives to queer (i.e., disrupt) homophobic theological discourses and to construct queer-affirming sacred texts and faith narratives.”<sup>108</sup> The provision of such an identity conflict resolution however not only applies to the perceived opposition of queerness and spirituality or religion. It can also be applied to the identity conflict of “rational” science and “superstitious” spirituality<sup>109</sup> or “world-changing” activism and “self-absorbed” spirituality<sup>110</sup>. Apart from the spiritual caregiver, personal factors, such as a reflexive ability or community resources can also have a positive influence in this process.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, Wolkomir also adds that religious beliefs can be explored through “new experiences, and interactions with other peers following the same religion/spirituality.”<sup>112</sup>

This brings us to the fifth and final factor that entails the provision and/or referral to communal spaces in which the intersecting identities can be explored as one. As Hays explains, “Pastoral counselors should identify and vet community resources”<sup>113</sup> and refer queer people “to supportive networks and resources [...]. Doing so creates opportunities for supportive relationships that will help support the person through recurring struggles with identity formation, self-acceptance, and disclosure throughout the life span.”<sup>114</sup> The author continues to say that “Pastoral counselors play a vital role in this regard, especially as many of us inhabit

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<sup>104</sup> Levy/Reeves, “Resolving Identity Conflict”, p. 65.

<sup>105</sup> Levy/Reeves, “Resolving Identity Conflict”, p. 65.

<sup>106</sup> Levy/Reeves, “Resolving Identity Conflict”, pp. 65-66.

<sup>107</sup> Levy/Reeves, “Resolving Identity Conflict”, p. 66.

<sup>108</sup> Hays, “Pastoral Counseling”, p. 345.

<sup>109</sup> Shelly, *Spiritual Care*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>110</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, pp. 198-212.

<sup>111</sup> Levy/Reeves, “Resolving Identity Conflict”, p. Levy, 64.

<sup>112</sup> Wolkomir, M. *“Be Not Deceived”: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men*. Rutgers University Press, 2006, pp. 13-14.

<sup>113</sup> Hays, “Pastoral Counseling”, p. 338.

<sup>114</sup> Hays, “Pastoral Counseling”, p. 339.

a liminal location between faith communities and the mental health field.”<sup>115</sup> From his interviews Sweasey also discerned the importance of community, to reconcile the queer identity with the spiritual identity: “The need to belong remains; we still need to find People Like Us [sic!] but cannot look to the compromise of ready-made ‘communities’ to do so. [...] We need to find places where we can be more who we are. Crucially we need to share honestly our experience”<sup>116</sup> He even goes so far as to say that such communities and “the sense of belonging without preconditions”<sup>117</sup> are most vital to this process as “Groups, which allow people to express both ‘truths’ about themselves are highly valued by their members.”<sup>118</sup>

#### **4.4 Practicing Spiritual Care through Research?**

In the middle of the process of conducting the interviews for this research, I realised, that asking them about their spiritual and religious practices was not only valuable for the sake of the research. The new understanding developed as interviewee IV stated, referring to the interview: “It’s like a therapy session, it’s really weird, it’s like when I talk to my sister”. I thereby noticed that the interviews themselves constituted a form of spiritual care. When I finished the interviews, I went back and realised that respondent III had also had an “epiphany” during the interviews regarding the intersection of being queer and spiritual, and participant VII who also exclaimed: “I’m using this a little bit as therapy” It showed how the participants were not only very welcoming to the fact that they could express and talk about their feelings and thoughts towards spirituality and religion, but also that it gave them something back. This is of particular importance as many of the respondents did not have access to context in which their spirituality and queerness were at the centre of attention. While some of the respondents did have other peers, they could talk about their practices with, others were more solitary in their spiritual journey. As such, the circumstance of having a safe environment to talk about these things constituted a form of spiritual care, showing an interest in their personal thoughts and understandings without judgement. This was something that was especially feasible, as I am personally engaged with the GFN and was trusted by the respondents insofar, that they shared these deeply personal reflections with me.

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<sup>115</sup> Hays, “Pastoral Counseling”, p. 339.

<sup>116</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 140.

<sup>117</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 142.

<sup>118</sup> Sweasey, *From Queer to Eternity*, p. 141.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Through the inductive research of conducting interviews with the queer attendees and former attendees of the Groningen Feminist Network and their interpretation, I have shown that the practices of lived spirituality are individual and subjective. The participants reconstructed their spirituality and spiritual practices in line with their own queer identity after having made negative experiences with spiritual or religious contexts. For this, they actively reflected on themselves and applied this reflection to their spiritual practices with the help of an intersectional feminist lens. The respondents also attached great importance to community in exploring the elements of spirituality that they interpreted to be the connection to something larger than the self. The practices of lived spirituality themselves, are therefore used as functional tools, that can be applied in specific circumstances to e.g., reflect on the self or feel connected. The feeling of belonging thereby constituted a major theme throughout the individuals lives, that they not only sought in relation to their queer identities, but also to the intersection with their spiritual or religious lives.

These observations have distinct implications for the provision of spiritual care for queer people. Not only should the caregiver critically reflect on their own values and morals including the application of intersectional lens, but they should also provide a safe environment for queer people to talk about their intersecting identities. Especially in secular contexts, the caregiver also should include the use of implicit assessment, such as by asking about their practices of lived spirituality. They should then accompany and aid the individuals in the process of resolving the potential identity conflict of being spiritual and queer. This is possible through the provision of or referral to communal spaces in which this intersection can be explored with others with similar struggles.

The question remains, how research itself, showing interest in the intersections of queerness and spirituality, and giving individuals the space to talk about such things constitutes a form of spiritual care. Other questions that have also not found their place in this study are: What is the importance of internet communities in the journey of resolving the identity conflict of being queer and spiritual or religious? How are spirituality and practices of lived spirituality connected to mental health issues, such as ADHD?

What remains clear however, is the fact that the journeys of reconstructing spirituality and religions through practices of lives spirituality is an ongoing process that does not need to be explored in solitude. I shall end with a quote by respondent VII, who stated that it was possible to find a way to work with the intersection of being queer and spiritual:



“it’s something that I think maybe some queer spiritual people still struggle with. [...] I think it’s something that you have to find yourself somehow, but if you have someone to guide you, to say like, if you find contradictions, those contradictions don’t mean that you have to disengage with everything, [...] maybe you haven’t found your tribe within your religion yet, [...] or even within your spirituality, then maybe this path isn’t your path, but that doesn’t necessarily mean you have to stop looking!”

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